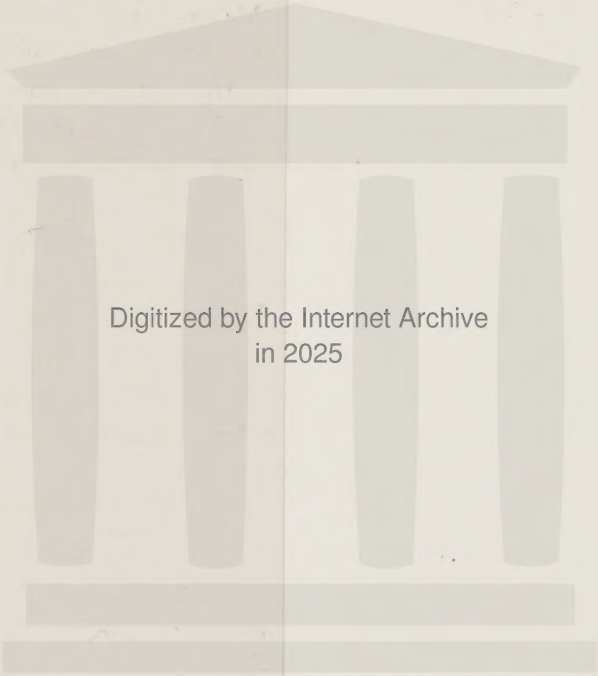
ELIZA FOR COMMON

O. DOUGLAS

(ANNA BUCHAN)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ELIZA FOR COMMON

'O. Douglas' was the pseudonym of Anna Buchan (1877 – 1948). She was a daughter of the Manse, busy aunt to her older brother John's large family and ran the household for her younger brother Walter. With the added stimulus of her literary family background, she was well placed to write the 'mild domestic fiction' which made her world famous.

She was born in Fife and moved to Glasgow when she was eleven, when her father was called to the John Knox Church in the Gorbals. She and her brothers spent their long summer holidays with their grandparents in Broughton, in the Borders. After the birth of her youngest brother Alastair, she left school to be useful at home and to work in the parish.

When in 1906 Walter was sent to take over the family legal and banking business in Peebles, Anna, aged 29, went with him and here they both stayed for the rest of their lives.

From this fairly restricted life bound by family duty, she drew inspiration for all of her books. Set variously in the Borders, Fife and Glasgow that she knew so well, the twelve novels are peopled with sharply observed characters very often drawn directly from her family and acquaintances. Though they are "Nice Books", she does not shy away from tragedy and loss, and the "pink sugar view of life" is seasoned with dry Scottish wit and shrewd good sense.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Olivia in India
The Setons
Penny Plain
Ann and her Mother
Pink Sugar
The Proper Place
The Day of Small Things
Priorsford
Taken by the Hand
Jane's Parlour
The House that is Our Own

ELIZA FOR COMMON

O. DOUGLAS

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"There is no friend like a sister"
Christina Rosetti; *Echo*

"She was at the lethargic age, inclined to stoop and round her shoulders, not caring much how she looked, careless about clothes, having only two passions – Shakespeare and her brother Jimmie."

As a story of a girl growing up in the 1920s *Eliza for Common* is difficult to surpass with its realistic portrayal of family life and the characters within this particular family.

The first member of the Laidlaw family we meet is not the sulky schoolgirl but "brother Jimmie", alone in the drawing room, pretending indifference as he awaits the telegram that could change not only his life, but the lives of the rest of the Laidlaws. Jim is important, not only to his family, whose concern is focused on the eldest child's future, but also to the plot – an Oxford scholarship offers escape and change.

And yet the nest that Jim wishes to fly is seen to be a particularly close-knit and attractive one, even if sometimes restrictive. The Laidlaws are an intelligent, humorous and well-read group of individuals. Like real little birds in their nests, they are not inclined to agree, but nip and niggle and elbow each other, secure in the knowledge that if any outsider attacked, ranks would close.

Meal times are particularly recognisable:

"Rob, don't make faces at your sister!"

"You're irritating your brothers, Eliza; don't do it . . ."

"Now, Eliza, don't drop your eyes at me. I can't stand it any more than the boys . . ."

The children fall naturally into two couples; Rob and

Geordie, Jim and Eliza. From a tiny child, Eliza adored the big brother who protected her. "As she grew older she had delighted to fetch and carry for him, and he had bestowed on her the honourable title of the Patient Cuddy" — And that is where this eldest child (admittedly female) balks — whether my younger sisters "delighted" in fetching and carrying was of no interest to me so long as they did it, but to label them "patient" or "donkey" would have been asking for mutiny (however futile). Presumably elder brothers were different.

By the time the book opens Eliza is still eager for Jim's approval, but she is also more of a companion, the recipient of his secrets and aspirations. Neither of them anticipates a future without their closest confidante: [Jim] "I know the very house 'Liza for you and me."; "Eliza was amused. 'Jimmie can't marry anyone for years and years. He's only twenty-three . . . Besides, I don't believe he'd want to marry'." Others remark on their closeness: "I thought at first you were a honeymoon couple you were so absorbed in each other and it gave me quite a pleasant thrill to find you were brother and sister."

One of the aims that unites Jim and Eliza is their desire to experience "Life", and both find their home setting a constraint on this desire. Church-going Glasgow in the remnants of its Victorian solidity had prohibitions on pleasure and narrow ambitions (boys to be ministers, girls, the wives of ministers) but Jim certainly has his sights on different and more distant goals: "To Jim at that moment, Glasgow represented everything in life that was drab and ugly and uninteresting. Oxford lay in rosy mists, a many-towered Camelot." Eliza's position as sole daughter of the

manse is infinitely more "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd" — no-one would expect *her* to study at Oxford: "Eliza thought how good to be a man and have some definite job to do. It seemed to the girl that there was no end to her tasks and they were all more or less uncongenial." But that does not stop her dreaming: "I want to get everything possible out of life."

As a male Jim has more freedom to escape even if he has to be extremely determined and hard-working to do so. Once the first step has been taken he embraces change with enthusiasm and makes it clear where his future allegiances will lie—within a term he acquires the Oxford accent. On Jim's return to Glasgow – "At the first sentence he spoke on entering Rob and Geordie had hurtled from the room and fallen on each other in the hall in ecstasies of mirth . . ." O. Douglas says that Jim didn't know his accent had changed and he continues to speak "Oxford" in Glasgow. With the Scot's adaptability of voice that must have been a placing of his new world above his old; Scots children were only too accustomed to switching between "Glesca" in the playground and "proper" in the home. In her autobiography *Unforgettable, Unforgotten,* Anna Buchan writes that she and her younger brothers did just that.

Jim is bringing the outside world back to his family, who are not always grateful for the privilege. Anxious to belong to his new world, he is not content with changing himself, he has the convert's "ambitions to remould his family nearer to his heart's desire." Despite being quelled by his mother, he doesn't entirely abandon hope, especially of Eliza who is usually a willing acolyte.

He also wishes to bring Eliza out into the world; as a

generous elder brother he has a strong sense of responsibility for his family and especially his sister. Naturally he still sees himself as in authority over her. Even if Eliza endorses his decision, *he* has decided Gerald Meade may not join them on holiday. *He* leaves Eliza to face up to her fears, whether of a hotel room or a mountain height. *He* suggests to their mother, not to her, that Eliza should bob her hair.

But as they grow older the relationship subtly changes. Eliza is happy that Jim no longer knows everything—Switzerland is new to them both. Later she can say, "Men need to be kept in their places, even Jimmie, bless him."

Throughout all the changes, growing up, moving away, the connection and foundation of their non-stop mutual interest is literature. "Generally they talked of books, of characters who seemed more alive to them than the people they met daily . . ." It is Jim Laidlaw's talent for telling stories that has allowed him to go to Oxford, pay his own way though life, buy presents for his beloved family and take his sister to Switzerland. Books and a shared love of books bind the whole Laidlaw family together; as with all O. Douglas books, her characters pepper their talk with quotes as the Cook peppers the soup. Fictional characters discussing fictional characters . . . but *are* the Laidlaws fictional?

In the dedication to *Unforgettable, Unforgotten* Anna Buchan writes; "My brother John used to say that when he wrote stories he invented, but that I in my books was always remembering." And, given that many of the incidents in *Eliza for Common* are repeated practically

verbatim in the autobiography as fact, does this mean that Jim Laidlaw is a portrait of John Buchan? This is no rose-tinted hagiography; Jim quickly becomes bored (hence he shortens his sister's visit to Paris), calls himself a snob, and carves out a career against his parents' hopes and wishes— " 'Liza, d'you think Father and Mother mind me not going in for the church?" Is his sister pillorying John Buchan? No, for O. Douglas' humour is mischievous, not malicious, and after all, the person who encouraged the writing and read the manuscript prior to publication was — John Buchan.

That is not to say, of course, that his sister was not teasing her much loved brother with family in-jokes. Returning to *Unforgettable, Unforgotten,* when describing the writing of *The Setons* (another, earlier, depiction of a Glasgow minister's family bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Buchans) she writes "My father was in it; and Alistair . . . all his funny ways and sayings . . . I hoped he would read them himself and laugh." Recognising family sayings, houses or incidents must have greatly added to the Buchan family's enjoyment of the O. Douglas books. Sharing memories, like sharing books, is one of the greatest bonds between people, as are the laughter and tears that accompany them.

Eliza for Common is fiction; Eliza and Jim Laidlaw are not Anna and John Buchan however close some of the similarities. The most striking difference between her creator and Eliza is that, despite her love of beauty and literature and her habit of watching everything that happened, Eliza is not a writer. She is admiring and appreciative of her brother's literary efforts, even upon

occasion critical ("I know he hates to write about young women and I must say he draws some dreadful sticks,") but she is not a writer. So Eliza is removed to a different plane from mutually influencing literary siblings. Dorothy Wordsworth, that other sister who climbed mountains and discussed Shakespeare with an adored brother, so modified William's writing that he wrote, "She gave me eyes, she gave me ears." And Anna and John Buchan took an equal critical interest and pride in each other's work.

Perhaps had Eliza had the outlet of authorship she might not have been so discontented—or would that have been, like reading, another congenial occupation she was unable to indulge in because of her endless tasks as daughter of the manse? She had such little time for "pleasure". But despite her dreams, Eliza has a strong sense of practicality and order. While her mother is ill, she sees there is no one else to take over the Laidlaw household—Jim regrets her being "put upon" but has no practical alternative. Eliza, 'Liza, Lisa, or Elijah, depending on how she is feeling and whom she is with, often sees the grass as greener—in Oxford, or even Glasgow—but she has one constant support; "I don't think I could have got through without Shakespeare". In a similar situation of family turmoil, Anna Buchan had the added escape of writing—recreating in fiction her family's happier times, for which we, her "Gentle Readers", can only be thankful.

Kirstie Taylor
Edinburgh 2010.

ELIZA FOR COMMON

CHAPTER 1

"Well, now let us begin. When we have got to the end of the story we shall know more than we do at present."

HANS ANDERSEN.

JIM LAIDLAW swung on the piano-stool in the drawing-room of Blinkbonny, Pollok Road, Glasgow, picking out tunes from *Songs of the North* with one finger.

It was after four o'clock and the short January day was done. Downstairs there were lights and preparations for tea, the drawing-room was cold and fireless, a damp fog pressing close to the window, but Jim sat on, striking notes uncertainly and humming in a rather tuneless voice the chorus of a song:

"Linten Lowrin, Lowrin Linten,
Linten Lowrin, Linten Lee.
I'll gang the gait I cam again,
And a better bairnie I will be. . . ."

A head came round the half-open door and a voice said, "I say, Jimmie, Mother says you're to come down."

Jim paid no attention, but began again at the beginning of his song:

"I sheared my first hairst in Bogend
Down by the fit o' Benachie;
And sair I wrought and sair I fought
But I wan oot my penny fee."

The boy at the door breathed heavily against the paint for a minute, then, "Come on, Jimmie," he said. "It's dreary up here, and Eliza's making hot toast for tea."

The song finished with a crash of discords. Jim rose and, pushing his young brother before him, left the room.

It was certainly more cheery downstairs in the dining-room, with a good fire, and red and white cups on a white cloth, and a red-shaded lamp in the middle of the table.

Mrs. Laidlaw was seated at the tea-tray, with a large family teapot before her, a woman of forty-eight, with sad blue eyes and heavy, patient lids, contradicted by a wide, practical, humorous mouth. There was nothing in the least unusual about her, but if you had gone round her large circle of friends and asked them what woman of their acquaintance they liked best to visit them, or to whom they would most quickly turn in any time of trouble, they would almost certainly all have answered, "Mrs. Laidlaw."

Some would have said it as if half-amused that it was so; some surprised at themselves—"Why—I believe—Mrs. Laidlaw;" some quickly and gratefully; but all would have said it.

Her husband, the Rev. Walter Laidlaw of Martyrs' Church, sat opposite. He had a way of crossing his legs and sitting sideways at table which annoyed his wife. He was doing it now. A tall man, he had rather long face, greying hair, and amused eyes. A boy, Rob, sat next his mother, an empty chair beside him, and across the table was his sister Eliza, a schoolgirl of sixteen with two long plaits of yellow hair.

Jim slid into the place beside his sister, while Geordie, who had summoned him and followed him downstairs by

the way of the banisters, took the vacant seat beside Rob, not, however, without some interchange of courtesies with that worthy.

Rob and Geordie looked as if they ought to be twins, but Rob was fifteen months older than his brother. They were considered by all who had the doubtful privilege of their acquaintance to be, perhaps, the most complete pair of miscreants that ever were bred in a manse. Geordie had freckles and sandy hair and a short nose and looked what he was, whereas Rob was of a most refined appearance, with a singularly gentle smile, but they both fought "like wild water-horses," as Mary-from-Skye said, with any one who would fight with them, and generally came in with damaged faces, and coats torn and buttonless.

This afternoon they were unusually silent and subdued, eating steadily, with their eyes on their plates.

It had been a long miserable Saturday in Blinkbonny,

A short time before, Jim had gone up to Oxford to try for a history scholarship and had come home with high hopes. This was the day, a Saturday, that the results were expected to be out, and Jim had arranged with a friend to wire to him if his name appeared on the list of successful competitors.

Always sanguine, the Laidlaws had begun to watch for a telegram from an early hour. Rob and Geordie, giving up their Saturday football, had stationed themselves in the branches of a big elm tree which stood by the front gate and from which they could command the road and be the first to rush and get the news.

But no telegram had come.

Telegraph boys, generally so rife, seemed to shun Pollok

Road that morning, so that the watchers in the tree had not even the excitement of sighting them and betting on whether or not they would stop at Blinkbonny; a million pounds was their lowest bet.

Never had the hours of a Saturday so dragged. It was a clammy cold morning, and the old tree was not a comfortable watch-tower—besides, what was the team doing without its leader? Rob captained a football team made up of boys in the near neighbourhood—a team of no reputation, it is regrettable to state. Every autumn they started with great intentions, determined to raise money for a new ball and goal-posts, not to speak of jerseys and other things. For this end they collected at the front doors of their parents' friends, Rob, with his hair beautifully sleeked down and his gentle smile irradiating his face, being spokesman. He was hard to resist, and they yearly raised quite a respectable amount, which, however, was used for no other purpose than to feast the members of this nefarious team. Not that they meant to cheat, but at the committee meeting called to decide how to lay out the money, discussion usually degenerated into a free fight, and the only thing that restored peace was the idea of a feast.

Rob took another look down the road and yawned, partly with cold, partly with boredom. Geordie, happy for the moment defacing the bark of the tree with his knife, paid no attention to his brother, and Rob slid down the trunk and wandered into the house.

"I'll ask Mother for apples," he said to himself, and went upstairs to look for her. Mrs. Laidlaw was not in her bedroom, but Rob walked about the room, touching things, and refreshing his memory about what lived in the little

drawers in the bureau . . . Evidently his mother was going out, her coat and hat were spread on the bed, and the sight of them set him off on a fresh track. He picked up the hat and put it on. Then he donned the coat, and buttoning the high fur collar round his throat, admired himself in the wardrobe mirror. Would he be able to cheat Geordie? His face wore the serene smile that always meant mischief as he cautiously downstairs. At the dining-room door he remembered about the apples and, assuring himself that if he had made the request it would have been granted, he took two from the dish on the sideboard, hitching up the long coat in order to stow them into his pockets. As he was about to open the front door and assume a mincing, lady-like look for the benefit of Geordie, he noticed in the umbrella-stand his cherished sword which had been lost for nearly a week. Forgetting everything else he gripped it, and shouting "My brand—Excalibur!" hurtled into the front garden.

Mr. Laidlaw, standing at his study-window with his sermon for the next day in his hand, saw what seemed to his short-sighted eyes to be his wife leap with surprising agility from the top of the stone steps, waving a sword. At the same moment he saw his neighbour, Mr. Dyson, a neat, rabbit-like gentleman, pass the gate and stand, open-mouthed, staring at the spectacle. For a few seconds he stood transfixed, then, averting his eyes, he raised his hat as if a funeral were passing, and went on his way.

Walter Laidlaw grinned broadly. "That wretched boy!" he murmured to himself. "What is poor Dyson to think?" Then he chuckled.

One o'clock came, and the early dinner would have been

a silent meal had it not been for Jim, who, affecting high spirits, chaffed his young brothers, while they, feeling it was a spurious gaiety, rolled their heads uncomfortably and kicked each other beneath the table to relieve the tension.

After dinner, "I'm going for a walk," said Jim. "Anybody coming? You two?"

They agreed and went, tumbling over each other in the doorway, to look for their caps. There was generally one cap missing, and each claimed the existing one as his own.

"We'll walk till tea-time," Jim declared as they set out.

It was the winter of 1919-20, a year after Peace was proclaimed, and the suburbs had got back their men—such as had survived—and were sinking back into their old comfortable ways. Motor-cars were possible again, and every little while the walkers were warned by a loud hooting that a car was about to emerge from an entrance gate to take its owners for a Saturday afternoon outing. Warmly clad, healthy children walked beside nurses wheeling perambulators; vans delivered provisions for the week-end; peace and plenty reigned.

And Jim's heart failed him. All these villas, smug and prosperous, seemed to lie like a weight on him, holding him down, making certain that he did not escape from Glasgow to that city of dreaming spires, Oxford.

It would have been idle to remind him that there was culture in Glasgow, brains of the best, splendid traditions; useless to point out that the suburbs of one city were very like the suburbs of another, that in Oxford, too, on a Saturday afternoon, vans delivered Sunday dinners to roads and roads of villas, nurses wheeled perambulators, and prosperous, busy men took their wives out in serviceable

little cars. To Jim, at the moment, Glasgow represented everything in life that was drab and ugly and uninteresting; Oxford lay in rosy mists, a many-towered Camelot.

Jim was twenty. He had gone to France a month before the Armistice and had been bitterly disappointed not to have got more of a chance, but the training had given him that gravely competent air so familiar to us in the young officers of the War, and made him seem older than his twenty years. He was a fair, clean-looking boy, a purposeful mouth being the most noteworthy thing about him.

He marched on doggedly for a time, then he looked at his wrist-watch and stopped, waiting till his brothers, who lagged some way behind, made up on him.

"Look here," he said, "it's a rotten day for a walk. Let's cut through here and go home by the Park."

Rob and Geordie, who loathed walking on roads, expressed entire agreement, and once their faces were turned towards home things became pleasanter. Jim's spirits rose as he told the two boys a chapter of the story which had enlivened many a walk for them, a long, continued tale of three young adventurers, whose names, surprisingly enough, were Jim and Rob and Geordie. For this young man was a born teller of stories and was already using his talent to some purpose, having had about half a dozen accepted by popular magazines.

As they turned into Pollok Road unconsciously Jim's steps quickened. The wire from Oxford *must* have come now: he had given it every chance: probably Eliza would come bounding to meet them waving it in her hand. Rob and Geordie would fain have rushed in first, but some instinct made them hang back and sedately shut the gate

before following their brother into the house.

Jim opened the door and paused. No one came running. Eliza was invisible, but through the half-open door of the study he could see his mother darning stockings by the fire.

It hadn't come.

Whistling cheerily, he hung up his cap and raced upstairs to the drawing-room. There, anyway, he would be undisturbed, especially if he played. None of the Laidlaws were troubled by much knowledge of music, but Jim's efforts with one finger were generally felt to be past bearing, so he had played over and over again the song he had opened at—

"Linten Lowrin, Lowrin Linten,
Linten Lowrin, Linten Lee . . ."

and, hearing him, his mother had sighed wearily over the large hole in the heel of Rob's stocking which she was mending, and Eliza crept upstairs and stood wistfully outside the door . . .

And now the curtains were drawn and it was no longer possible to stand and watch the gate, and that, somehow, seemed to make the thing more hopeless.

Mr. Laidlaw bore the brunt of the conversation at tea. He had been in Dennistoun visiting two families and—"It's quite ridiculous," he said, "that they should come all that distance across the city to Martyrs'. They must pass at least a dozen churches on their way."

"Well, Walter," said his wife, pausing with the teapot in her hand, "I do hope you didn't put that into their heads. If we don't get members from a distance, where are we to get

them? You know quite well that round the church there are nothing but Jews and Catholics. I simply tremble at term-time when I hear of one family and another going out to Newlands or Giffnock . . . we can only keep going if people are loyal and stick to their old church."

"Quite so," said Mr. Laidlaw peaceably, helping himself largely to black-currant jam, "but we're working round in a vicious circle . . . What excellent jam this is!—Mrs. Houston is a sensible woman. I was sorry for her. She was telling me her son was going to be married, and she said, 'Sons are but little use; just when ye think they're going to be a comfort, some lassie snaps them up. Daughters are mair dependable, for they've to wait until somebody spiers them'."

Mrs. Laidlaw rebuked Geordie for trying to put a whole cookie into his mouth at once, then nodded at her husband in agreement with his last remark.

"I know," she said. "I've been annoyed times without number by young men rushing away and marrying, without a thought for the widowed mother who had slaved to bring them up, whereas the poor, patient daughters bring in their earnings and help in the house as well. Oh, I never commiserate the mother with three or four girls. I tell her she's a fortunate woman."

"Now then, Eliza," said Jim, "you see what's expected of you. You're to keep the family."

Eliza emitted a sound of scorn, while Geordie grinned across at his sister and said, "Elijah's all right, she's got the ravens."

Rob applauded his brother's witticism as in duty bound, but Mrs. Laidlaw suppressed both her young sons.

"How often have I told you not to call your sister that? It's irreverent as well as rude, when you think who Elijah was." Then she turned to her daughter. "But I must say, Eliza, it is rather disappointing how little you make of your opportunities. Here you are, almost seventeen years of age, nearly finished with school, and the only prize you ever got was for needlework—and yet at home you're a regular bookworm. I can't understand it. Remember those care-free schooldays will probably be the happiest you will ever know."

Eliza looked at her mother sulkily and said, "Then I'm going to have a jolly poor life! You wouldn't talk about 'care-free' days if you were at St. Margaret's; we're chivied from morning till night . . . I don't pretend to be clever: I'm not like Jimmie."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't talk as if I were a beastly infant prodigy," cried Jim. "Cheer up, 'Liza. You know a dashed sight more about everything that really matters than any other girl in the school, I'm sure of that; and as for supporting yourself and your parents, you won't be asked. Look at these stout fellows over there"—he pointed to Rob and Geordie, who grinned in an abashed way—"and I expect to do something in the world—even if I have missed this shot at Oxford."

"You haven't," shouted his brothers, while Eliza murmured, "Oh, Jimmie," and put out a hand, which he avoided.

After tea Mr. Laidlaw said that he had a sick call to make, and hurried out that he might be back the sooner to his sermon; while the others settled down in the study, as was their custom of an evening.

Jim buried himself in a book. Rob had a Latin exercise to do and sat himself down at his father's writing-table, tongue protruding and elbows well spread out, to tackle it, while Geordie lay on the floor working at a boat he was making. Mrs. Laidlaw resumed her mending, and Eliza, curling herself up in an armchair, seized the opportunity to do nothing whatever. She was at the lethargic age, inclined to stoop and round her shoulders, not caring much how she looked, careless about clothes, having only two passions—Shakespeare and her brother Jimmie.

"The post office closes at seven," Rob said suddenly, breaking a silence.

Jim glanced involuntarily at the clock. A quarter to six—more than an hour of hope left! Anything might have kept the wire, he told himself: his friend, Cameron, who had promised to send it, might have been away somewhere till late afternoon; or ill, perhaps; or, again, the results might have been late in coming out . . . Was that the sound of feet on the gravel? Yes, the door-bell rang. Jim forced himself to sit still while the two boys tumbled wildly out of the room. Eliza rose and stood with her eyes fixed on the door through which her brothers had vanished. Mrs. Laidlaw sat with her needle suspended, listening.

They heard Mary's voice asking indignantly what all this fuss was about, the door opened and shut, and then, very gently, Rob and Geordie sidled back into the room, and without a word to any one went on with what they had been doing.

Hearts, after throbs, ache. Jim sank a little farther down in his chair, and his mother suddenly left her mending and went out of the room, coming back shortly with a small

locked box in her hand. Kneeling on the hearthrug before her eldest son she proceeded to unlock the box and produce a little bundle of papers.

"See, Jimmie," she said, "I've brought all the deposit receipts. Your father and I've talked it over and we think we can send you to Oxford for a year anyway, and you could try again for a scholarship from there, couldn't you? It seems a pity to waste a year when the War kept you back anyway . . ." She held out the papers . . . "There's about £200 here."

Jim flushed hotly and pushed away the proffered papers. Rising to his feet he pulled his little mother (clutching still the tin box) up with him.

"*Mother*, d'you really think I'd take the money you've scraped so hard to gather ? . . . If I go to Oxford I go on my own. With what I can make by writing I should manage quite comfortably. I'm not beaten. They've relaxed the rules about age; I'll try again. But I wish it weren't such a long journey, it runs away with the deuce of a lot of money."

Even in moments of emotion Mrs. Laidlaw did not forget her duty.

"Not 'the deuce,' Jimmie," she remonstrated. "Why use that word?"

"Well, the dickens, then . . ."

The mere talk of ways and means was cheering, and, insensibly, every face brightened. Eliza reminded her brother that she had still the five pounds she had got from Uncle James on her birthday, while Rob and Geordie rushed to make a raid on their joint money-box, only too glad of an excuse to break it open, and no one had time to

listen for feet on the gravel, and looked up in surprise as Mr. Laidlaw came into the room wearing his hat and coat, and holding out the longed-for orange envelope.

"I met the boy at the gate," he said, "and told him there was no answer . . . Is it all right?"

Jim tore open the envelope, his face quite white; then he gulped, and in a high boyish voice said, "At Balliol," and walking to the fire he stood up very straight and put his hands into his trousers pockets.

"Quite so," said his father, and went out to remove his coat and hat; while Eliza and her mother threw themselves on the proud young man on the hearthrug. As for Rob and Geordie, their behaviour was that of two prize rams meeting for the first time. They glowered, then bent their heads and butted each other violently, finally rolling over and over on the floor in a sort of ecstasy.

"Look at these idiots," said Eliza, rather ashamed of having shown emotion.

In a second Jim was down beside them, buffeting them and prodding them, while he chanted triumphantly the chorus that had sounded so dreary a few hours before:

"Linten Lowrin, Linten Lee.
I'll gang the gait I cam again,
And a better bairnie I will be . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw wiped her eyes and smiled at her three sons.

"Well, well," she said, "now that it's come I can't think why you want to go to Oxford, Jim. Isn't Glasgow good enough? We'll miss you."

Jim, with one foot upon his two prostrate brothers, turned a flushed laughing face to his mother.

"I don't go till next October. Why, it's nearly a year . . ."

"Yes, and a lot can happen in a year," his mother reminded him with a sigh.

CHAPTER 2

"A lily-bud, a pink, a rose."—*Balisand.*

THE year had almost passed, and not very much has happened in it.

It was December, and the Laidlaws sat in the dining-room at Blinkbonny. The room was the same more or less—a little shabbier, perhaps, the carpet a little more rubbed, the furniture more marked by kicks from impatient feet. Walter Laidlaw and his wife were the same, except for added lines and wrinkles; Rob and Geordie had grown in stature, though in grace not an inch, but in Eliza the year had wrought a miracle.

The rather heavy girl with the round face had suddenly sprung into a tall, handsome creature. Her face was still round, but now the colouring was clear white and rose, the grey eyes were larger and brighter, and the mouth, which had been thick and rather sullen, seemed now merely generous in its width, and was vividly red over the white teeth. The shining hair was parted in the middle and plaited into a coil over each ear. Her dress was of knitted wool, soft-blue, which brought out blue lights in her eyes and brightened the gold of her hair.

Jim was expected home that evening after his first term at Oxford, and they were discussing possible changes in him.

"If he speaks English," Geordie warned them, "I'll laugh—so will Rob."

"Idiots!" Eliza withered her brothers with a glance, while

Mrs. Laidlaw said, "Indeed, it will be a great pity if he hasn't taken on Oxford," a remark which made her husband chuckle, and ask—

"Now I wonder what, exactly, you mean by that, my dear?"

"Well, I just mean that I hope he's getting all the good out of the place—culture, and an accent, and that sort of thing. Anything else would be most disappointing."

"So it would," Mr. Laidlaw agreed. "Geordie, your mouth is too full. I think the train comes in about 6.30? I suppose I'd better meet the boy."

His wife nodded. Walter Laidlaw's liking for meeting trains was well known, and regarded as an amiable weakness. "He ought to be here by seven o'clock," she said. "I'm having finnan-haddock and poached eggs for his supper; he always enjoyed that, and I don't expect he's been getting it much at Oxford."

"I wonder," said Eliza slowly, "I wonder what he will be like."

"He hasn't had much time to change," her father reminded her.

"No, but his letters are quite different in these two months," Eliza insisted. "At first you could feel how homesick he was—you know when he said he smelt the tea because it was the only thing that reminded him of home, and talked about the sight of the pollarded trees making him sick, and of how he hated men brought up at English public schools—and gradually the letters changed, and now you can see that he feels himself quite 'in' things—So, either Jimmie has become more like English people, or—"

"Or they have become more like Jimmie," Walter

Laidlaw finished. "That doesn't seem very likely, does it? But I've noticed that he seems to have settled down and made a place for himself." He smiled at his daughter and went on, "You are a wise child, 'Liza; always were. You used to sit quite silent, a small stolid child, munching bread and butter as if for a wager, while your elder brother chattered, spinning words, and then, quite suddenly, you would come out with a remark that tore his airy fabric to ribbons. Solid, sensible Eliza!"

Eliza looked reproachfully at her father as she drew her slim shoulders very straight. "What a cruel thing to call your only daughter, Daddy! Solid and sensible—straight hair, flat feet, shiny nose!"

"You're awful proud, Elijah," Rob said, regarding his sister distastefully.

"Why? Because I clean my nails?"

Rob, after a glance at his own nails, put his hands under the table, while Geordie, with an accusing glance towards Eliza, said, "She reads poetry, Father."

"There are worse crimes, my son."

"But, Father, she doesn't read it for lessons, she *likes* doing it. Not jolly things either, like Kip, or Newbolt, or 'Out spake brave Lars Porsena,' but rubbishy things about—oh, I don't know what about—love and people dying and that sort of tripe . . ." Geordie's voice fell to a shamefaced murmur.

"Rob, don't make faces at your sister!" Mrs. Laidlaw commanded.

"Elijah's doing it too," Rob cried shrilly.

"Am I, Mother?" Eliza turned a calm face for her mother's inspection.

"She is," Geordie shouted. "That's her scornful face. Ya—a—a!"

"You're irritating your brothers, Eliza; don't do it," said Mrs. Laidlaw, knowing from experience that Rob and Geordie were never wholly in the wrong in a quarrel with Eliza.

"Yes, Eliza," Rob said, waving a superior hand, and smiling his exasperatingly gentle smile, "do remember what a great girl you are," and before his sister could rise in her wrath and smite, he and Geordie were out of the room and clattering down the kitchen stairs to Mary-from-Skye, who, they knew, would shelter them from all attacks.

Mrs. Laidlaw pulled the tablecloth straight, picked up a chair that had been thrown over in the scrimmage, and shook her head at her daughter.

"I wonder you trouble, Eliza," she said.

Eliza lifted her pretty eyebrows in half-assumed surprise.

"Oh yes," her mother nodded at her, "I know well what a maddening expression you can put on—and the boys are wild enough in all conscience without your help. You should try to be a refining influence with your brothers—shouldn't she, Walter? You could be a great help with their manners if you were always gentle and polite to them—an only girl has such a chance to influence . . . People often said I was just a sunbeam in the house. Now, Eliza, don't drop your eyes at me. I can't stand it any more than the boys . . . I do wish you'd make your hair fuller in front; it's perhaps artistic, but to me it gives you an old look.—Yes, Mary, what is it? I'll come in a second."

When her mother had bustled out of the room Eliza went to the glass in the sideboard and surveyed her hair,

then she turned to her father, who was watching her, saying, "Don't you like it, Daddy? Is it old?"

Walter Laidlaw looked down at the flushed face upturned to his.

"Old?" he said. "Most wonderfully, pitifully young . . . But if your mother thinks your hair would look better—what did she say?—bunched?—why not try it? . . . Is there anything you ought to be doing now? I've got fully an hour before I go to the train, and it's hardly worth while beginning anything—shall we finish *Cleopatra*?"

Eliza gave a jump and clasped her father's arm.

"Oh, let's—we've got all the most glorious bits to read yet . . . Daddy, what would people *do* if there weren't books to get inside?"

"What indeed!" echoed her father, as, arms linked, they made their way to the study.

Three hours later Jim had settled down in Blinkbonny as if he had never left it.

Like most much-looked-forward-to events, his homecoming had been slightly disappointing.

To his mother the disappointment lay chiefly in the way he had eaten his supper. He had not partaken of the finnan-haddock with the zest she had expected.

"Isn't it good, Jimmie?" she had asked.

"Very good, Mother," he had assured her, and casually pushed aside his plate, as if haddock and poached eggs, once a luxury, was now a thing of naught. Mrs. Laidlaw felt that somehow she had been put at a distance from her boy.

Eliza watched her brother, saying nothing. She had adored Jim since she had realized anything, at four, or thereabouts. The world she remembered had been a

terrifying place, full of cart-horses that lifted great hairy feet and brought them down with a clamp on the hard ground, and showed enormous teeth, as she passed clinging to her nurse's hand; and great dogs that ran towards one with bounds; and long passages, and nurseries that were homely and happy in the daylight, but became filled with lions and tigers as soon as the light was turned out. And her only protection against all these dangers had been Jimmie He had taken her hand, this valiant man of seven, and had shielded her from all harm.

As she grew older she had delighted to fetch and carry for him, and he had bestowed on her the honourable title of the Patient Cuddy. She had listened when he talked, gravely absorbing all his plans for the future; she had slavishly followed his taste in books, had saved her pennies to buy him the sort of sweets he liked: to please him had been her one care in life; a word of commendation made her happy for days. To her he had always seemed to dwell on Olympic heights. She had watched him racing through all the first reading-books while she struggled with the alphabet; watched him conquering compound addition while she laboriously added two and two to make four, and later saw mathematics, which was always to remain a mystery to her, yield to him its secrets.

And then he had begun to write. Eliza alone had been permitted to see the first rude beginnings, which were sent hopefully to the most unlikely papers, only to return like homing pigeons. It was Eliza who, on that never-to-be-forgotten day, was waiting to rush to him when he returned from his classes at Glasgow University with the envelope, stamped on the back with the name of a well-

known publishing firm, containing a letter from a kindly editor accepting and mildly commending an article. He had been absurdly young to write, and fearing that his youth and inexperience would be only too evident in his writings, he had adopted a cynical elderly style, which was decidedly comic when taken in conjunction with his young and ingenuous countenance.

And now Eliza looked at her brother and decided that he had changed. His clothes were the same, of course—a suit was not got or lightly discarded—but he wore them differently. There was a difference in his collar and tie, his hair, the way he held himself—a general well-brushedness; before, he had rather delighted in being careless about such things. He had picked up little tricks, too, movements with his hands, ways of standing, all quite unconscious; and his accent—

At the first sentence he spoke on entering Rob and Geordie had hurtled from the room and fallen on each other in the hall in ecstasies of mirth.

Eliza was anxious in case Jimmie would hear the senseless sounds, but she need not have feared, he did not know that his accent had changed, any more than he knew that now he spoke with authority, a returned Ulysses who had seen men and cities.

He stood on the hearthrug, his mother in one armchair with her knitting, Eliza in the other with idle hands; his father sitting sideways on a high chair with his legs crossed; Rob and Geordie on the floor at his feet, ready at a moment's notice to get under the table if the Oxford accent should prove too much for them.

Jimmie looked round the circle and his eyes remained

on his sister's burnished head.

"Hullo! 'Liza's got her hair up! Umm . . . Nice . . . I rather like those snail-shell things over your ears, 'Liza, they give you a mediæval look . . . I told you, didn't I, about the two girls who were staying with the Master? Miss Grahams—their people have a place in Galloway. Scotch as can be and frightfully nice. They were almost more like boys than girls, with little close-cropped black heads, and as slim as—as fishing-rods.—Mother, what about 'Liza bobbing her hair?"

Mrs. Laidlaw clucked her impatience at the suggestion and Eliza's heart fell. She had looked in her glass and told herself that surely Jimmie must think her improved, might even think her pretty, but a careless sentence was enough to make her entirely lose conceit of herself. "Close-cropped little black heads" . . . "Slim as fishing-rods." That was what Jimmie admired. What, then, was the use of her height, her coils of shining hair, her colouring of clear rose and white? At once she felt herself bulky, high-coloured, commonplace.

She sat silent and downcast, all her happy complacence wiped away, while her mother asked questions about Jimmie's life in college, about his meals, who made his bed, how often the sheets were changed, and if he had enough towels and tablecloths.

"Your scout comes and asks what you want for breakfast, and brings it from the buttery," Jimmie explained.

"And what d'you have?" Geordie asked, always greatly interested in food.

"Oh, the usual things, bacon and eggs, sausages, fish. There's a chap in the room beneath me, Beaton's his name,

an awfully good chap but sleepy-headed, and the scout was trying to get out of him what he wanted for breakfast. He said, meaning to be helpful, 'Mr. Laidlaw's taken plaice, sir,' and Beaton, half asleep, thought he meant I'd just come into being, so to speak . . . My rooms aren't up to much, not really much more than attics, right at the top, but they're all right for the present. I've got my eye on jolly good ones, richly furnished, as you might say, genuine antiques, and purple velvet curtains—eh, what?"

"Purple," whispered Rob, and Geordie snorted.

"And I hope you go regularly to church?" Mrs. Laidlaw said.

"Chapel every morning."

"Oh *that!*" Mrs. Laidlaw brushed the Church of England aside with a wave of her knitting-needles. "I mean the Presbyterian Church."

"Yes, I'm generally there on Sunday morning . . . It's a beastly bore early chapel, but I must say I enjoy Sunday evening service. The music's good, and it's jolly singing hymns you know in such surroundings. Father, have you heard this yarn? A man tried to get out of early chapel by saying he was a Parsee. The next morning at 3 a.m. his scout called him. 'Dean's orders, sir—get up and worship the sun.' The artful dodger was speedily converted to Christianity."

Mr. Laidlaw smiled appreciatively, while his two young sons heaved with emotion at his feet. He stooped down and regarded them in a puzzled way.

"What are you doing, boys? You're like two dogs lying there. Either sit up and behave decently or go to bed. It's nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock!" said their mother. "Be off, boys, at once, and take your bath one at a time. You swamped the bathroom last night . . . Come back, Geordie, and walk out of the room on your feet—crawling there like a bear! I wish you were both the length of going to Oxford and learning manners."

But this was too much for Rob and Geordie. Convulsed with hysterical laughter they rolled out of the room, each beating the other feebly over the head.

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head as the door closed behind them.

"When are those boys going to learn sense?" she asked.

Her husband laughed. "Let them alone," he said, "they're good boys on the whole."

"Good!" echoed his wife.

"Yes, goodness looks out of Geordie's ugly face, and Rob never did a mean thing in his stormy life. They're just like two young bears, tumbling about and fighting, without manners, but also without guile. Don't worry, Ailie.—And how goes the writing, Jimmie?"

"Fairly well, Father." Jimmie was lighting a cigarette. "I've got a good deal of regular work—an article every week in the *Statesman*, and I find time to write a story now and again, and later on I'm going to try and tackle a play."

"A play!" ejaculated Mrs. Laidlaw.

Jimmie turned to his mother. "I know you don't like the sound of it, Mother, but I've always been frightfully keen about the drama, though until I went to Oxford I'd hardly been within a theatre, and, funnily enough, I think I've got a sort of notion of stage-craft. But it's no good talking about it just now. I may be simply no use at it at all, but I'd like to

try, for if a play's a success the author makes pots of money."

He stopped, but his mother merely shook her head as she knitted, while his father said, "I daresay," and bent forward to poke the fire. But Eliza's eyes were like lamps as she said, "Oh, Jimmie!" and he caught her arm, crying, "Come and help me to unpack, 'Liza. I've got lots to show you," and the couple went, taking the stairs several steps at a time.

It was Jimmie's old room, sparsely furnished, and full of remains of boyish hobbies. There was the glass-topped "Museum" that a joiner in the church had made for him, containing his collection of birds' eggs, and various arrow-heads, and coins, laid neatly out on cotton-wool; a ship made and fitted by himself hung over the bed; a home-made bookcase held an array of books—boys' stories and cheap editions of the poets.

Jim was eagerly undoing the straps of a bag. "These are for Christmas," he said, producing sundry parcels. "Father, Mother, and the boys . . . I say, d'you think Rob and Geordie'll slaughter each other altogether with these knives?"

"They're splendid," his sister assured him; "just the sort they've been longing for . . . But you shouldn't have troubled about presents. D'you find you can manage all right?"

"Oh, absolutely. There are all sorts of ways of saving without seeming mean, and the men I see most of are all quite poor. And I've been lucky about placing stories well—an awful pot-boiler bought all the presents! And I've got a typewriter, which is a great help, and . . . what's that?"

"The boys shouting for you. I expect they want to say good-night."

"Come on then—Hullo, you two young fellows. What's the row?"

Rob and Geordie shared a room and a bed—a perfectly good room, but a somewhat inferior bed. The mattress was so humpy that the occupants had christened the two chief summits "Ben Rob" and "Ben Geordie," while the valley between was the "Land of Beulah."

"Rob's cheating," said the voice of Geordie. "He had his bath first and got into the Land of Beulah, and I can't lie all night on the scrap he's left me."

"I had to do it last night," said the voice of Rob.

"How d'you generally lie?" Jim asked.

"One on Ben Rob and one on Ben Geordie," said Eliza. "That divides it properly."

"Get up, both of you," said the young Solomon. "Light the gas, 'Liza, and we'll try to make a level plain.—Now then . . . !"

Meantime, in the dining-room, the parents of the children sat looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"*Plays!*" said Mrs. Laidlaw at last.

Her husband was playing with the tongs, replacing small bits of coal that had fallen from the ribs.

"There's nothing actually immoral in writing a play. A dramatist," he reminded her, "may be a very fine man."

"Oh, I daresay . . . Walter, do you remember when he was a little boy how he used to say when any one asked him what he was going to be, 'A minister and preach the Gospel'?"

"I remember," said her husband.

CHAPTER 3

"I am going to give a party . . . and I am in a great fright."
Letter from William Makepeace Thackeray.

THE day at Blinkbonny began with breakfast at a quarter to eight. The two boys had to be at school at nine o'clock, and it took them half an hour to get there. It took, also, constant prodding on the part of their mother and sister to make them eat steadily and not stray into arguments with each other. After breakfast the one servant, Mary-from-Skye, came up, and they settled down more or less reverently to listen while Walter Laidlaw read a chapter from the Bible and prayed.

The morning after Jim came home things were rather difficult. Rob and Geordie, aware that they had not done their lessons with anything approaching thoroughness, were in a thoroughly disgruntled mood. They had, in the privacy of their own apartment, brooded over the thought that something might happen to prevent them going to school.

"Old Hutch'll be mad about that exercise," Rob said, rubbing his nose moodily. "He's the worst."

Geordie considered, with one stocking on and one in his hand. "Would it be all right to pray that old Hutch would be dead? He's got heart disease anyway; young Simpson told me."

"Young Simpson only hoped he had—besides, I don't want him dead. He's sometimes quite decent, though he's a beast generally . . . Hurry up, we'll be late for breakfast."

They were late, and when their father opened the big Bible they wailed in unison, "We've no time for prayers, we'll miss the car."

"Nonsense," said their mother briskly, sitting down in her own low chair. "Prayer and provender hinder no man."

"I don't think that can be quite true, though it *is* a proverb," Eliza demurred. "If you were flying from a horde of savages and calmly stopped and ate a meal and held a prayer-meeting, and the savages came up and ate you, then I'd say you had been hindered."

"I dislike that way you have of arguing about everything, Eliza," her mother told her, while Rob complained, "Aw, Father, we're dreadfully late. Read a wee short psalm, or as sure as anything—"

"Well, well, boy, sit down," Mr. Laidlaw said. "It's not twenty past yet," and he proceeded to read, while the boys sat on the edge of their chairs watching the clock. But when they all knelt down to pray, peace, for a few minutes, slid into their souls. It had always been Walter Laidlaw's way to take his two youngest children within his circling arms when he knelt to pray at family worship, and they shut their eyes tight and kept very quiet, for they knew that when their father prayed he was speaking to God.

Eliza, who, hardly knowing that she did it, watched everything that happened, knew well that action of her father's. It had begun when the boys were tottering little fellows, apt to move about the room during prayers, and their father had held them, one in each arm, to keep them quiet. There was something beautiful about it, Eliza thought. It made her think of some words that always oddly moved her, *How often would I have gathered thee as*

a hen gathers her chickens under her wing, and ye would not . . .

The family lingered for a few minutes in the dining-room after the boys had gone tearing out of the gate, their coats half off and half on, discussing the letters the postman had brought, glad of a breathing-space before the work of the day began. Mrs. Laidlaw felt it was the moment to broach a project that she had been pondering on for some time.

"I've been thinking," she said, laying down a letter, "that we should give a party while Jimmie's at home. It's years since we had one, and we're owing a good many people. What do you think, Walter?"

Walter Laidlaw was deep in a leader in the *Glasgow Herald,* and merely looked up for a moment to say, "Certainly, my dear, give a party;" but Eliza protested.

"Why should we give a party? I hate parties anyway. I'm not allowed to play bridge or dance, so what's the use of going out?"

Mrs. Laidlaw clicked her tongue impatiently. "As I've often told you, Eliza, there are plenty people to dance and play cards without ministers' daughters."

"Exactly, but you're merely a nuisance at a party if you don't do as others do."

"You can play games and listen to music, and that makes a delightful evening. But I needn't put myself to endless trouble and spend your father's hard-earned money preparing a party if you are going to drop your eyes and look bored about it. *I* shan't thrust a party on you . . . But when I was your age I'd have jumped at the suggestion."

Eliza, realizing that she had hurt her mother and spoiled

something that she had been happily dreaming about, said quickly—

"I'm sorry, Mother. It's frightfully good of you to be willing to give a party . . . Whom would you ask?"

"Why, just your young friends and Jimmie's, and perhaps a few older people. I've been thinking about it for a while. But we must get on now. Put the dishes tidily on the tray for Mary—that mustard-pot needs refilling—and see that the butter and jam are tidy for tea. Open the window before you leave the room."

Jim looked quizzically at his sister as he followed his father to the study, and Eliza, as she put the dishes together, thought rather enviously how good it was to be a man and have some definite job to do. It seemed to the girl that there was no end to her tasks, and they were all more or less uncongenial. Mrs. Laidlaw was an old-fashioned house-proud woman who detested the modern girl's attitude to life, and was determined that her daughter should walk in the old ways as long as she had any control over her; so she drilled Eliza, as her own mother had drilled her, in all household duties, trying to make her tidy, methodical, thrifty, as the Victorian women had been. Eliza never thought of rebelling; she had something of her father's humorous serenity, and also a good deal of common sense. She saw her mother's point of view and more or less sympathized with it. It was only fitting that a house should be well kept and well ordered; they could only afford one servant, so, naturally, she had to take her share of the work. And there was a time for everything; she hated slipshod ways. A friend had told her one day, "The beds were to make and the rooms to do, but the sun was shining, and I

said to myself, 'The beds'll wait, but the sun won't,' so I went and played a round of golf—wasn't I right?"

Eliza considered—"You were right if you enjoyed your game. I'd have hated it myself. The thought of the unmade beds and the undusted rooms would have got between me and the sun."

So Eliza rolled butter and saw that the jam dishes were tidy, and then went upstairs to help Mary to make the beds and sweep and dust. Marketing, visitors, collecting, and attending meetings made up the rest of the day. Sometimes when Eliza went to bed she wondered what she had done to fill the day, for there did not seem to be one thing worth remembering.

Mrs. Laidlaw did not let the proposed party drop. Before the day was finished she had settled to her own satisfaction every detail.

"This day week," she said, turning the heel of a stocking for Geordie. "That's the 20th, and not too near Christmas. We'll give them a cup of tea in the drawing-room when they arrive—no, I know it's not considered necessary, but it's cheering, especially to people who have come from the other side of the town—and then supper at ten. I'd like it to be a nice evening. Eliza, couldn't you and Jimmie do something to make it a little different—invent a game, or do a dialogue or something?

Eliza and Jimmie made horrified sounds at the suggestion, but their mother continued unheeding. "Yes, set yourselves at once to find something suitable. I do hope Mrs. Shepherd will be free to come; she can be trusted to make things go, though I never feel sure about what she'll say next—that's the worst of these vivacious people. Odd

that her husband should be so morose! . . . I often think it would be wise to make a point of cultivating people who can do things—sing or recite or be amusing—for you never know when you may need them."

"A good plan," said Jim, who had come in for a talk before going to bed, "would be to keep all the people who can do things in a sort of institution and hire them out as Clarkson hires wigs."

Eliza laughed, but her mother said seriously, "The paying would spoil everything, it's your friends you want to see do things.—Eliza, will you write the invitations to-morrow? I wonder if we should get cards with 'At Home' on them, or write friendly notes?"

Mrs. Laidlaw, like most other people, was the better of having something to look forward to. She was a very busy woman, for not only did she look well to the ways of her household, she also, largely, ran her husband's church. Martyrs' Church was near the river, quite two miles from Blinkbonny, but three nights in the week the minister's wife attended meetings there, and on Sunday she had a class for young women, which cost her much preparation. Practical to her finger-tips, Mrs. Laidlaw was yet a dreamer. She saw everything in pictures. The long road to and from the church was shortened often by what she saw with the eyes of her mind. And this party she had dreamed over. In the most transparently simple way she was anxious to impress her friends. She wanted them to meet Jim with his Oxford culture thick upon him, and Eliza, who—she half hoped and half feared—was turning out something of a beauty.

To-night as she looked at her young daughter standing

holding Jim's arm and laughing at some joke, she saw Martyrs' Church decorated with flowers and palms—an awning—Walter with the tall girl on his arm coming down the aisle—herself, heart-broken of course, but handsomely dressed in black velvet—a shadowy figure in the choir seat the bridegroom—

On the 10th December the whole house was turned upside down. Most of the furniture had been taken out of the drawing-room and stacked elsewhere to make room for more chairs. The family were feeding for the nonce in the room looking out to the garden which was still called the nursery, the dining-room being closed to the public.

"It's a blessing we're all well," said Mrs. Laidlaw. "That's always my nightmare about giving a party, that some one will take measles or influenza."

She wore a large blue pinafore, from the pocket of which, like a flag of truce, floated a white silk duster. Her hair was slightly dishevelled, and she looked at her family, without seeing them, in a distraught manner.

While her husband was telling of a grave political crisis she broke in with, "Is it twenty-seven counting ourselves, Eliza, or guests only? I always forget . . ." Her lips moved. "Four from Atholl Gardens, three from Glenholm—seven. Three Scotts—ten; the artist people, I forget their names—twelve. From our road six . . . Is that eighteen?" She began to count on her fingers.

Mrs. Laidlaw had been up since six o'clock laying the supper-table. She liked to do it herself, and to do it just as she had done it in the early days of her married life, when, in wide fluted skirts and enormous puffed sleeves, she had rustled about receiving her wedding callers. In the middle

of the table were placed the fine old Sheffield-plate candelabra that had come to her from her great-grandmother, and these she draped with smilax. Tea-cups were at one end, coffee-cups at the other, and all down the shining white cloth were plates of sandwiches and cakes, and all manner of sweets, trifles, meringues, honeycomb shapes, not to speak of chocolates and preserved ginger. She delighted in getting out all her silver and recalling from whom each piece had come, and Eliza liked to help her mother and hear the old stories. Mr. Laidlaw sometimes looked in too, to steal a bit of preserved ginger, and listen for a minute with a smile.

Two silver salvers which lived a guarded life between folds of chamois leather were gazed at admiringly.

"Solid," said their owner, lifting them out and rubbing them thoughtfully. "One from Uncle James in London, and one from Aunt Jessie . . . You never knew Aunt Jessie, Eliza; she died before you were born. She married my Uncle Thomas—a handsome woman and gave dinner-parties. Uncle Thomas was rather a trial to her; she said he was bucolic. He was, of course, but she knew it before she married him, so it was unreasonable to make a fuss. He hated fuss, and she liked things properly done. I'm afraid my mother was a trial to her too; she didn't take her seriously. Aunt Jessie invited her to dinner and to stay the night—it was a long drive—and not realizing it was a formal dinner, she took my brother John, who was a firebrand at home. When Aunt Jessie saw him she said, 'Annie, if I had wanted John I would have asked him.' She died of heart trouble, poor soul, and Uncle Thomas fell back into his old easy ways. These *entrée* dishes—it's a pity

not to use them. If we unscrew the handles they will make silver dishes for the meringues and things. The Normans gave me them—don't you remember Mrs. Norman?"

"Did she give me a doll's cradle with curtains and real pillows and blankets?" Eliza asked uncertainly.

"She did indeed. The kindest woman! She had four daughters all over six feet, and they all had chinchilla coats. I think they came from some relative in Russia. . . . They all made rather unhappy marriages, generals and people like that, middle-aged but not very steady. It was a pity, for they were nice girls, but full of silly pride; they could never forget that their grandfather was a lord."

"Where are they all now?" Eliza asked, her imagination fired by the thought of four tall young women dressed in chinchilla coats and married to generals.

"Dead," said her mother, routing in the silver chest.

"What! All four?"

"Three anyway, but I've lost trace of Sophie, so she may be alive. They were too big to be really strong, and then India—Shall we put out these silver vases? I never liked them, but poor Peter Young gave us them."

"I remember Mr. Young," Eliza said. "He brought us Edinburgh rock. He is dead, isn't he?"

"Oh yes. He was a bachelor of fifty, most comfortable in his country cottage, with an old housekeeper and a good income. He came to stay for a few days, and as it happened, there was a Miss Greig with us one night, to address my class social. I knew nothing about her except that she was a good speaker, and I told Peter that, but she asked him to call the first time he was in Edinburgh, and he did it, the poor innocent, and the next we heard was that they were

engaged. We went to the marriage, your father and I, and we both felt very uneasy. There was nothing that you could take hold of, but I didn't like either Miss Greig or her relations . . . And Peter died within a year. I'll never forgive myself, for he was so comfortable with his old housekeeper. No, it wasn't my fault exactly, but still—We'll put poor Peter's vases out anyway, on the sideboard, with yellow chrysanthemums."

The first mishap of the day occurred after early dinner, when Eliza scalded her arm. It was not a bad burn, and, covered with boracic powder, it soon lost its sting, but almost immediately she was seized with a violent cold in her head.

"Good gracious," her mother cried, "I've heard of people getting pneumonia from a burn, but never a cold in the head. Eliza, how did you *do* it? I expect it will be pneumonia next."

It stayed a cold, however, and had somewhat abated when the time came to dress. Eliza had a new dress and had been looking forward all day to putting it on. Her mother had wanted white, but Eliza had got what she had set her heart on—the green of young beech-leaves, and she stood like some nymph strayed from a woodland glade in the best bedroom of Blinkbonny and studied herself in the mirror door of the wardrobe, while her mother, struggling into her one and only evening dress, said, "I can't say I care for these sacks of dresses, they are neither shape nor form, but the green does make your hair very golden . . . Help me with this, will you? . . . A hook has caught somewhere . . ."

They were both standing before the glass, and Eliza, looking over her mother's shoulder at the reflection, said,

"Why, Mother, what have you done to your hair? I believe you've been to the hairdresser?"

"Yes," Mrs. Laidlaw admitted in a shamed way. "I ran down before tea and got it waved a little. You see, Mrs. Hartree is always so neat and well dressed, and I thought—but what was the use? I'm like a heather-bush already."

Eliza laughed into the glass as she caught up a stray lock and fastened it securely. "It only needs the comb run through it. You look very nice, but why don't you show more of your pretty neck and arms?"

"Oh—"Mrs. Laidlaw was studying her reflection, not ill pleased with what she saw. "A minister's wife should never be conspicuous."

"Then," said Eliza, beginning to tidy the room, "I'm glad I'm not a minister's wife, for I *want* to be conspicuous."

"Mother" (it was Rob's voice), "I've lost my sporran and Geordie's stolen my tie."

"Are you boys never dressed yet?" Mrs. Laidlaw bustled away to set things right, and as Eliza put everything straight she heard Geordie's voice chanting from his room a low ditty he delighted in:

> "Said the wee bull-dog to the big bull-dog,
> Will ye let me pull your tail? . . ."

When she went into the drawing-room some few minutes later she found all three brothers there. Rob and Geordie were in high fettle. They were only to stay up for an hour and then slip quietly away to bed, but they were to have sandwiches and meringues in their own room—indeed they had already supped on jam tartlets and

whipped cream and drunk deep of lemonade.

When Eliza came in the two boys greeted her with derisive shouts, but Jim was impressed by his sister's appearance, and said so. Eliza, pleased with his approval, smiled and preened herself, and her complacent air exasperated Geordie. As she stood peacocking before a mirror he whipped out an ancient air-gun that he had concealed behind a cushion, and creeping up behind his sister he placed the nozzle behind her ear.

"Die, traitress!" he cried, pulling the trigger.

Eliza, convinced that she was fatally wounded, dropped like a stone. Rob threw himself on the floor beside her howling like a wolf, while Jim shook the culprit violently and asked, "Was there anything in it, you amazing young idiot?"

At the sounds of distress Walter Laidlaw came rushing upstairs, followed by his wife, and in a minute or two Eliza was so far recovered as to sit in a chair and weep bitterly.

"What happened?" demanded her mother.

"Geordie shot me," Eliza sobbed, "but he didn't mean it."

Geordie gulped and looked very white.

A large blister was rising behind her ear, and half-choked with crying and the cold in her head, the poor nymph was in no state to receive the guests that were almost due, but her mother's bracing voice spurred her to make an effort.

"Stop crying, Eliza, and go and sponge your face well with cold water. You're not really hurt—Walter, do for any favour go and change—Geordie, what I think of you I shan't begin to say just now . . . Good gracious, is that some one arriving?"

There was a tense moment, followed by a relieved shout from Jim. "Only Ewan," as a tall young man was ushered in.

He hesitated in the doorway. "I'm afraid I'm too early—"

"No, you're not," Jim assured him, "but Geordie has been shooting 'Liza, so things are strained for the moment.—Poor old 'Liza—you go and wash your face."

Ewan Cameron murmured sympathy, but Eliza passed him without a word. She felt it to be a humiliating moment.

CHAPTER 4

" . . . The scrupulous chronicle of small beer."
The Northern Muse.

MRS. LAIDLAW awoke the next morning a little depressed, wondering why she had done it, regretting the money spent, doubtful if the friends invited had been worth the trouble, and inclined to be pessimistic about the whole scheme of things. But by breakfast-time she had recovered her spirits.

It was a mild morning, grey, misty, still, the sort of day that makes of a country landscape something dreamlike and unsubstantial, but in a town is merely damp and disagreeable. The Laidlaws paid little attention to the weather. If it was sodden and damp outside, the house inside was warm and full of life and high spirits.

There was little trace of last night's feast in the dining-room. The Sheffield-plate candlesticks stood on the sideboard, still with a wisp of smilax trailing. An unwonted profusion of fruit in green majolica dishes showed something unusual had taken place, and Rob and Geordie were pleasantly conscious of various unfinished sweets—trifle, meringues, creams—which would doubtless appear at dinner. They were very happy, those two boys, for Christmas holidays began that afternoon, so lessons would only be a play; life was rosy; Geordie kicked Rob out of sheer good spirits, and Rob responded with a good-natured growl.

All morning Mrs. Laidlaw, helped by Eliza, tidied the

house and put the silver carefully away, and as she tied each article into its own particular bag she talked over every detail of the party, prattling away contentedly, hardly noticing whether or not Eliza listened.

"I thought Mrs. Hartree looked well—how her white hair becomes her! I can't remember ever thinking her good-looking until quite lately; and surely she's dressing better? I do like a widow to keep to black—a middle- aged one anyway . . . I don't know why it is, but it's always interesting to have Mrs. Hartree at the house; she seems to make things more worth while somehow. If you've made a special effort to have things nice, you're quite certain she'll notice and appreciate it; and sometimes, if somebody says something unconsciously funny and you look towards Mrs. Hartree, there's always understanding in her eyes.

"And she reads," said Eliza, rolling the best teapot in flannel before putting it in its bag, "and has her own opinions about things; doesn't merely say with everybody else as most of us do."

"It's less trouble," said her mother, "and so few things are really worth arguing about. But Mrs. Hartree never gives an opinion unless you ask for it. I do dislike the people who are always saying 'In my opinion. . . .' The other day at that Conference I went to with Mrs. Learmond—something about youth—a mere child beside us got up after a paper had been read and began—'In my opinion . . .' Mrs. Learmond turned to him and said, 'Sit down, you're much too young to have an opinion.' I was terribly abashed, but the boy remained quite calm. Mrs. Learmond certainly has got the courage of her convictions, but she was very complaisant last night—praised the sandwiches and

approved of your dress."

Mrs. Laidlaw was silent for a minute, evidently following some train of thought, then she began again—

"It's a pity Meta West has got such a terribly long nose and chin. Her dress was so pretty, but with that sort of face clothes are of no avail. You should be thankful, Eliza, that you have got reasonably neat features, not grotesque in any way. In this world it's a great blessing to be as much as possible like any one else, in looks and everything else. A genius must feel terribly alone, and even a beautiful woman can never be quite at ease, either hating to be looked at, or resenting not being looked at.—That doesn't go in there, child; the wooden box.—I must say I liked your new artist friends. Is Neish the name? I wasn't sure, so I didn't call them anything . . . They were so easy to talk to, and so amused, when we played that game that needed a bit of string, to find we kept a basket full of bits neatly rolled up."

"Mrs. Neish's clothes are quite perfect," Eliza said, "amusing without being too odd."

"Yes, and I was surprised to see how well sewn together she was. You remember those other artists you brought to the house—their clothes were just run together, hardly stitched, and their hats had no linings . . . but they were agreeable, easy creatures to talk to . . . Mrs. Neish quite made the evening. I couldn't help telling her so, when she went away, and thanking her. She seems to have a liking for you, Eliza. She calls you the Blessed Damozel and says you are still leaning out of heaven. I was thankful Mrs. Learmond didn't hear her, for what she would have thought I know not."

Eliza flushed deep. Her mother's words reminded her of

something she would have liked to forget.

As the guests left the night before, Mary Neish had said in her pretty exaggerated way, clasping Eliza's unresponsive hands as she said it, "It's been the most lovely party, and Gerald and I have so enjoyed meeting your mother and father—what angels!" And Eliza, feeling as wooden as a Dutch doll, had replied confusedly, "Not at all."

Could anything have been more feeble? More absurd? And to Mrs. Neish of all people!

Eliza had first met Mrs. Neish at a party, a sort of musical evening mixed with bridge. Eliza did not play cards, and the master of the house, knowing that, had said in the kind jokesome way which the girl so detested, "The others can play bridge, Eliza and I'll play a wee house."

Mary Neish, a new-comer to Glasgow and much interested in everything, noticed the girl with the grey-blue eyes and burnished hair who sat with an oddly detached air, like a spectator at a play, and asked her hostess to introduce her. They got on excellently. Mary Neish was skilled in drawing people out, and Eliza had soon told her all there was to tell of herself and her family; short and simple annals.

"And have you any special work?" Mrs. Neish had asked, and Eliza, looking at her with her straight gaze, said—

"I've no real work, but I help in the house, and collect for the Central Fund and Zenana Mission and three or four other things, and I've a Sunday-school class and . . ."

"And where does pleasure come in?"

Eliza had not been brought up to expect pleasure; duty was what her mother had preached to her. She looked

puzzled, and then smiled rather charmingly—

"Ministers' daughters have souls above pleasure," she said.

Before they parted Mrs. Neish had made her promise to come to tea with her in the studio. "But prepare to be disappointed," she warned her. "It's not a bit like a studio in a book; we're terribly respectable, and disgustingly neat and clean."

Of course Eliza had adored it; of course she had fallen in love with her new friend, and asked nothing better than to be allowed to worship at her shrine. And now, when the goddess had actually come to Blinkbonny, had deigned to be pleased with the entertainment and to express approval of Eliza's parents, she had found nothing to say except "Not at all."

Eliza wrapped up silver with misery in her heart. What did it matter though she had looked well and Jimmie had nodded approvingly at her, when she had proved herself so unfitted for society. There were fifty things she might have said—"How kind of you!" —"I'm so glad!"—"It was so good of you to come" —all of these remarks were harmless and fairly suitable; but—"Not at all."

"It's a good thing to mix people at a party," her mother was saying when Eliza roused herself from her own thoughts to listen. "Mrs. Hartree said that to me when she was going away. I think she meant she liked meeting people like the Neishes . . . For my own part I'd rather talk to Mrs. Stit than almost anybody. I suppose because we live more or less the same sort of life. Last night I could hardly tear myself away from her to talk to the other guests. She was telling me about some evangelistic meetings they are

having in their church, with wonderful results. I wish we could get a little life into Martyrs', but it never was a very bright church—I think the name's against it."

Mrs. Laidlaw knelt before an open tin box, and, looking at her daughter in a puzzled way, said—

"That hymn, you know—

'Bright with many an angel
And all the martyr throng—'

I wonder if that's not a mistake. If I'd been martyred I doubt if I'd be very bright, even in heaven—but that's not a right way to speak . . . And then your father will not advertise himself or make any attempt to bring the church into prominence. Some one said to me only the other day, 'If Mr. Laidlaw were only more ambitious, with his gifts he might go far.' But there it is, I talk and I talk, but all to no purpose; he only laughs and quotes things to me. When I married I thought I might see him Moderator, but that hope is long past. Look at Mr. Stit with not half the brains!—Eliza, what *had* your father on his feet last night? I quite forgot after the people went away to speak about it . . . I laid out black socks for him to put on when he changed, but he didn't use them. It seemed to me when I looked at his feet in the drawing-room that he had socks with a pattern. Where had he got them?"

Eliza, instead of replying, began to laugh, and presently sank helpless to the floor, while her mother, without knowing in the least what she was laughing at, joined in.

After several attempts Eliza explained. "He didn't notice there were socks laid out for him and went and looked for

some, of course in the wrong drawer. Then he tried the boys' room, and it was a pair of *Geordie's stockings* he was wearing. His foot went well up the leg—they must have been far from comfortable—so the turn-down pattern bit showed. I never saw anything so funny. Don't say anything about it, Mother; he was so proud of himself for having solved the difficulty without troubling anybody."

"Was there ever such a man?" Mrs. Laidlaw laughed and shook her head. "He isn't a day older than Geordie . . . I could see Mrs. Hartree was rather amused at Jimmie's Oxford accent. She is inclined to smile at people—but I just said that I was so thankful to have Jim for an example to Rob and Geordie; though when they'll begin to profit by it I know not."

Mrs. Laidlaw's voice trailed away hopelessly, and Eliza said—

"Glasgow people think every accent queer but their own. I don't believe they even know they have an accent."

"Oh yes, they do, but they like it. Glasgow people are like that; everything that is theirs is perfect, and they don't mind if you laugh at them—they're only sorry for you not knowing any better. Not that I would ever think of laughing at them . . . I thought Ewan Cameron looked well last evening. There is something very likeable about Ewan, though he is such a dreamy fellow, and Jimmie says in Oxford great things are expected of him.—Well, that's the last of them." She locked the silver chest and stood up to untie the apron that had protected her dress. "It's a great thing, Eliza, to do what has to be done *at once*. It was my mother's way, and there wasn't a housewife like her in the countryside . . . Are you going out now? I've written out a

list for the grocer . . ."

To Eliza the other great event of Jim's first vacation was the dinner-party Mrs. Neish gave. It was Eliza's first dinner-party, and one minute she was filled with rapture at the thought of being in the same room as her divinity for a whole evening, the next she was cold with fear that she might not be able to control her forks, and fail utterly in conversation. She bore it as long as she could and then told her trouble to Jim, who laughed aloud.

"What does it matter though you do mix your forks?" he asked.

"And I don't know how to take a man's arm. Suppose I put out the wrong hand?"

"In that case the best thing you could do would be to dance a step or two of a reel, for you'd never get into the dining-room. Don't be an idiot, 'Liza. Only very formal people now send you into dinner arm-in-arm; you just saunter in any old way. Besides, artists won't be sticklers; I expect we'll sit on the floor and gnaw bones."

Eliza laughed, a good deal cheered, but presently went back to her moan.

"I don't know what to talk about to the man beside me."

"When in doubt recite a verse of poetry," Jim advised flippantly.

The whole family, including Mary-from-Skye, inspected the couple before they set off for the party.

"I wish I had silver slippers," Eliza said, standing up very straight and tall in her green dress. "These bronze ones aren't right."

"Oh surely," said her father, "bronze and green in the woods—"

"In the woods perhaps," Eliza said, "but . . ."

"Besides," Mrs. Laidlaw pointed out, "silver slippers make the feet look larger, and yours are by no means small."

"Small!" echoed Rob. "Elijah's got hoofs like a cart-horse when she kicks you."

Mr. Laidlaw could not hear his daughter maligned.

"Nonsense, boy, your sister never kicks you."

"Perhaps not now," said Rob, "but it's not long since she stopped. She's not much of a lady yet, I can tell you, though she *is* going to a dinner-party. Ho, Elijah!" but Eliza, covering herself up in a tweed coat and snow-boots for the journey across the city in a tram-car, treated his taunts with the disdain they deserved.

"If I'm not taken to a bedroom, however shall I get out of these things?" she said, eyeing the snow-boots with dislike. "Don't sit up, Mother, Jimmie has the latch-key."

"We won't be late," Jim promised. "I expect we'll be glad enough to get away."

But he was wrong, for Mary Neish was a born hostess, and her guests were never in a hurry to depart.

The first of the lions left Eliza's path when she found herself conducted to a bedroom with a blazing fire, where two cloaks were already spread out on the bed. They were lovely things of velvet and fur, and there were no other snow-boots about.

Eliza wondered what the demure maid thought as she carefully laid aside the old tweed coat, undid the snow-boots, and pointed out powder and hairpins on the dressing-table.

Jim smiled encouragingly as a neat parlour-maid showed them into a room that seemed full of soft lights and

laughter, and as Eliza stood for a second, taking breath, as it were, before she plunged, the hostess came quickly forward, and presently she found herself seated by the fire while a very tall man with a long thin face said things that needed little or no response, about January in Glasgow and the value of a bright fire.

Once able to take in her surroundings she found that the company, besides herself and Jimmy, consisted of the man who was talking to her, two youngish women, and another man, eight in all. Not at all a formidable gathering, she thought, noting with relief that the women were not particularly smart, and the men of a comfortable middle age, so she plucked up courage and smiled shyly up at her tall companion, who seemed now to be speaking about his personal appearance.

"I find," he was saying, "that if I wear an attenuated tie in a sailor knot people invariably tell me how ill I look, but if I wear a bulgy one tied in a bow I am congratulated on my healthy appearance."

Mary Neish caught the words and turned, laughing. and cried, "I know. Such a small thing makes all the difference. Did I dream it or did some one say dinner was served? Let's go down and see.—Marjorie, lead on; you know the way."

It was a round table, and at first the conversation was general. To Eliza it sounded alarmingly brilliant, and it amazed her that Jimmie seemed absolutely at home in it.

In a pause her neighbour, the thin man, whose name she found was Temple (he seemed to be connected with the University), turned to her and said, "Do you see the winter through in Glasgow, Miss Laidlaw? Endure hardness, if one may so put it?"

"Yes," said Eliza, wondering innocently what else she could do; "we only go away for July and August."

"Ah, it's a pity to go away in July. Then Glasgow is really pleasant: most people out of it and the air so clear with works closed down that you can see the hills. Try going away in January instead."

Eliza shook her head. "We can't. You see, the church people are away in July and very much at home in January. My father is a minister."

"I see—Scots Church?"

"Oh yes," surprised at the question.

"Then you may claim to be really Glasgow, not just incomers as the rest of us are?"

"I've been in Glasgow since I was six, but we belong to the Borders."

"I wondered. You haven't a Glasgow voice."

Eliza looked pleased. "I'll tell father that the next time he accuses me of having a Glasgow accent . . . Do you like living here?"

"I like it exceedingly." Mr. Temple handed Eliza a dish of salted almonds and took one himself. "But we move to Oxford in the spring. In many ways I regret leaving, and my wife is very down about it."

"Oh, but to go to Oxford!" Eliza gave a long sigh. "Jimmie's at Oxford—my brother, you know—at Balliol. Some day I'm going to see him there, but I seem to know it all already—Magdalen Tower and the High, and the Broad, and the river through the green meadows." She had forgotten to try to talk; her eyes were shining, her face alight with interest. Mr. Temple smiled back, well pleased that the child had forgotten her shyness.

"I'm glad you feel like that about Oxford. There's no place like it to me—even in winter, when it's a misty, moisty hole, as nobody can deny. Yes, you must see Oxford. In May, please, if possible, when she puts her best foot forward. Do you know England well?"

"I've never been out of Scotland."

"But that's splendid. What a lot you have before you!"

"Yes," said Eliza. "Stratford-on-Avon."

Mr. Temple looked surprised. "Stratford-on-Avon! Why, I wonder?"

"Why? Because it was Shakespeare's own place. Oh, I know it is modernized and spoiled, but there must be *something* left . . . Anyway, I've got to see it . . ."

After dinner about a dozen people came in to drink coffee, and make good music and talk, but by this time Eliza was so at home in the surroundings that she met them without quailing, and when Mary Neish suggested that she and her brother should do the sketch she had heard them do at Blinkbonny, she rose to her feet obediently, and before she quite knew what she was doing, she and Jim had been arranged at a small table and were acting the comedy of the girl from the country sent in to her first dinner-party with a bored man-about-town.

They did it very well; the audience was enthusiastic, and Eliza for the first time tasted the heady wine of success. All the way home in the tram-car she sat wrapped in a warm and happy dream . . . Twice Mrs. Neish had brought people to her who had wished to be introduced. To be introduced to *her*—Eliza! This was, undoubtedly, living . . .

CHAPTER 5

"The trivial round, the common task,
Should furnish all we ought to ask."
J. KEBLE.

THE pleasant memory of her first dinner-party had to last Eliza for some time, for after Jim had departed for Oxford the Laidlaws settled down to the daily round unenlivened by much social life.

January and February are not as a rule pleasant months in Glasgow; the rain is ever faithful, the streets are greasy with mud, damp umbrellas and mackintoshes scent the air. The shops, too, have a woebegone look, and the garments marked down to "Sale prices" would seem from their dejected appearance to feel their position keenly. True, it is not entirely dreary. To the seeing eye there is a sort of reticent beauty in the black and white of the dull January weather, and February brings moist rushing winds from which leap "splendid regatta days where the white sails endlessly over the blue." And the flower-sellers at the street corners do their best to supply sunshine, with their baskets heaped with mimosa and yellow tulips and daffodils, while in most houses bulbs are being eagerly watched.

At this time Eliza's life was largely lived in books. Every minute that she could get out of sight of her active little mother (who thought that only the ill and the aged should read through the day) was spent poring over some volume, generally Shakespeare. Jim had given her at Christmas *The*

Oxford Book of English Verse, and she delighted to carry it about and browse in it.

Her mother grew quite alarmed to hear her one day, as she sewed loops on some new kitchen towels, murmur to herself—

"When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes . . ."

and broke in with—

"I looked into your room just now, Eliza, and was shocked to see how untidy it was. If you don't take yourself in hand you will grow into one of those *thowless* women who are such a disgrace to their sex. Run up now and put your room right, and try to get your mind off poetry. It's all very well in its way, but I fear it will prove a snare to you. Try to be practical. Now, Eliza, don't drop your eyes in that superior way. Some day, when I'm gone, you will be thankful for your mother's training. I know I bless my dear mother every day of my life for what she taught me."

And Eliza went to tidy her room, musing grimly on the great gulf that seemed to be fixed between life in books and life as it was lived at Blinkbonny.

One day, a particularly dreary day in the end of January, with a sky that seemed to rest on the housetops and a moisture-laden atmosphere that was both muggy and cold, she felt that life was ugly indeed. Her mother had decided that they would begin to turn out all the drawers and cupboards and wardrobes in preparation for the spring-cleaning—and Eliza hated above everything to turn out drawers! It seemed to her such a futile business to empty the contents of a drawer on the floor, dust it thoroughly, fit

in a clean paper, and put everything back; but she did it; it was not worth making a fuss about; besides, somebody had to do it.

She believed that her mother really enjoyed the process, and time was when Mrs. Laidlaw had begun preparations for the spring-cleaning with a light heart, when she had donned a large pinafore and started with the greatest gusto to open boxes and re-arrange everything, sometimes sitting on the floor for hours lost to the world, as she read old letters and turned over tenderly her own wedding veil and slippers and the robe in which all the children had been christened. But that was when the circle had been unbroken. Now there was one box that she opened with a heavy heart. Very gently were the things lifted out, kissed and cried over, and wrapt again in soft white paper. Strange things to be so tenderly treated—a boy's half-worn boots, rather kicked at the toes, some dog-eared lesson-books scribbled over with funny faces, a knife with a broken blade, a watch that had been so maltreated that it had given up the unequal contest and settled into eternal silence. These things had belonged to Tom, Tom who had died three years before, when his years on earth numbered only eleven, and had left the world a much emptier place to his parents.

On this dull January day Eliza conscientiously tidied her drawers—folding her ribbons, laying the handkerchiefs in neat piles, weeding out things here and there for the next Jumble Sale, and having finished, changed her dress and went down to early dinner. The two boys did not come home till tea-time, so dinner was a peaceful meal.

Mrs. Laidlaw took her place with a sigh, and when her

daughter said, "Well, Mother, enjoyed your morning?" she felt that vague antagonism which even the most loving mother sometimes feels for a daughter, and thought how easily managed boys were in comparison.

"You talk, Eliza, as if it were a special pleasure to me to turn everything up. It's sad work to me now turning out cupboards." And Eliza, remembering the pitiful little box of memories, felt compunction for her careless speech. But she would not show it, and her mother went on—

"Are you remembering that we're going to tea at Mrs. Stit's? You haven't made yourself very smart. I never did like that dress."

"Mrs. Stit's!" cried Eliza. "I'd forgotten. This *is* going to be a beastly day."

Her father, who was supping soup in a contemplative manner, raised his eyebrows.

"Things going badly?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing special. Merely spring-cleaning looming, and I've to go down to the district to look after two girls who haven't been attending my class; on the top of that, tea at Mrs. Stit's, and then one of those old evangelistic meetings at night."

Mrs. Laidlaw sighed deeply as she looked across at her husband.

"How," she asked, "can we expect a blessing on our meetings when the minister's daughter talks like that? Oh, Eliza, is that all evangelistic meetings mean to you?

Eliza merely looked stubborn, but her father said-

"Let the child alone, Ailie . . . I sometimes think ministers' children get a poor chance."

Eliza turned eagerly. "Oh, Father, they do. It's all so

much just the business of our lives—religion, I mean. We hear so much about working up this and that, and unless you're heart and soul in it—"

"And what's to hinder you being heart and soul in it?" Mrs. Laidlaw demanded.

Eliza shrugged her shoulders and was silent.

Mrs. Laidlaw took a spoonful of soup, laid down her spoon and went on, "I was reading the other day, in the *British Weekly*, I think, that the particular devil that attacks the young is secularism. Your head, my dear, is too full of poetry and plays to have room for the things that really matter . . . When I was your age I went as happily to an evangelistic meeting as to a party." Then she looked at her husband and admitted, "Of course I knew I would see you there."

"It's funny to think of father as a young man holding meetings. Imagine Jimmie! What made you want to be a minister, Daddy?"

Mr. Laidlaw did not seem to be at all offended at the question. "Because," he said mildly, "I wanted to be about my Father's business. Have you any objection?"

Mrs. Laidlaw answered for her daughter. "Of course she hasn't, and I do wish, Walter, you wouldn't encourage her when she's pert." And Eliza, who had been made rather ashamed by the look in her father's eyes, now hardened her young mouth into an obstinate line and lounged ostentatiously in her chair to show how little she cared what any one thought of her.

An hour later she was walking down a street near the Clyde searching for the number she wanted. When she found it she hesitated in the close before mounting the

stairs, not knowing whether the Mrs. Henry she was looking for might not live on the ground floor. It was almost quite dark and she peered at a door to see if there was a nameplate on it, but there was none, so she knocked. When the door was opened an inch or two she spoke into the gloom.

"Does Mrs. Henry live here?"

"Ay," said a voice.

"Could I see her?"

"Come in if ye like," and Eliza stumbled over the threshold into a living-room of sorts.

It was a little lighter than the close, but it could never be really light in winter, for the one small window looked on to a narrow court and a high wall. The room seemed to be kitchen, bedroom, and wash-house in one; a fire choked with ashes burned in the grate, a teapot with a broken spout stewing beside it. In the window was the sink (known as the "jawbox"), filled to the brim with dirty dishes; a tub stood on a chair in the middle of the floor with half-washed clothes standing in water; garments were hung behind the door and on the bedposts. The remains of a meal stood on a table—a lump of butter on a messy plate, the heel of a loaf, a bit of hard cheese. In a corner a lean cat was worrying something, but Eliza dared not look, in case it was a rat.

Mrs. Henry was a large woman with a big face the colour of oatmeal. Her entirely unfettered figure seemed to be held together only by an apron. She lurched a little as she walked and her eyes had a glassy stare.

"I'm in a gey steer," she told her visitor. "I startit to wash yesterday, but wi' one thing and another I couldna get

feenished, and I was seeck a' nicht. Ay, three times I was up at the jawbox, an' I'm no free o' it yet. I hed to tak a drop o' speerits to help me to keep up, for I couldna luk at ma denner. Ucha, I think it was a bit o' potted heid we hed for oor supper, but I dinna ken: mebbe no, but onyway, I didna feel like washin' the day."

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and gave a laugh which shook her fat body like a jelly.

Eliza hastily averted her eyes and said, "I'm sorry you don't feel well. I really came to ask for your daughter Maggie. She has missed two Sundays at the class, and I wondered if she were well."

"Aw, Maggie—" Mrs. Henry got hold of a broom and clung to it for support. "She's a' richt. If she wisna at the class she'd be trailin' the streets wi' her boy." She leered at her visitor. "Weel, ye canna blame her, ye'll likely hey a boy o' yer ain? I was aye a great yin for the boys masel. Ay, I've buried twa husbands, an' I'll mebbe see anither oot, wha kens. Maggie's the first yin's. Beenie there," she jerked her thumb towards the bed, "is a' that's left o' ma second family. I hed twins, but they died—mebbe juist as weel."

Eliza, peering into the obscurity of the bed, saw that among the filthy blankets a child lay. There was no slip on the pillow, and the dirty ticking supported a head of tangled dark hair, and two great dark eyes watched the stranger. Eliza was reminded of some wild thing in a trap.

"Is she ill?" she asked.

Mrs. Henry, still clinging to her broom, cast a careless eye towards the bed. "Uch ay, something aboot the spine. She was drappit when she was a wee wean. She's no to get owre't, the doctor says. It's a gey job for me, I can tell ye.

The lassie should be workin', rinnin' wi' milk or papers, an' here I've got her to nurse."

Eliza went and stood beside the bed, looking down pitifully at the small, pinched, hostile face.

"Why do you say she can't be cured?" she said, turning quickly to the mother. "Doctors can do such wonderful things now. If she were taken to the Children's Hospital—"

But at that Mrs. Henry began to weep maudlin tears.

"Ma wean gang to a hospital! Whit a notion! Hev I no been a guid mammy to ye, Beenie, ma wee hen? Me buyin' milk for her and lossin' ma sleep, an' rinnin' aboot doctors! Ay, an' whit business is it o' yours, I'd like to ken, ye great lang interferin'— Oot o' this—oot o' this, I tell ye . . ." She lurched forward, and Eliza, after a glance at the unblinking dark eyes in the bed, made for the door, followed by horrible words from the half-tipsy woman.

She stood in the close-mouth for a minute, glad to feel the cold air on her face, so shaken by the encounter with her pupil's mother that she half thought of going straight home; but reflecting that that would be a feeble course to follow, she started off down the long street to look up the other absentee pupil—Jessie Calder.

This time, though the mouth of the close was almost as dark and noisome as the last, things improved as she mounted, and she was relieved to find that the door marked Calder had a bright bell.

Mrs. Calder opened the door, a little thin woman with patient eyes. "Jessie? Oh ay, it's ma granddochter ye want. Ay, she's been lyin' this last fortnicht, but she's some better. Come in. Ye're Miss Laidlaw? I see ye at the kirk, an' Jessie cracks a lot aboot ye."

They went through a small lobby into a kitchen which was bright even on this dark afternoon with well-polished brass and a shining grate.

A woman was leaving the kitchen as they entered, and was introduced as "the lady next door—Mistress MacQueen!"

"I'll just be going, Mrs. Calder," she said, "an' I'm real glad ye've seen the doctor an' that he's given ye satisfaction. Good-bye the noo."

Jessie was working a sewing-machine in a corner by the fire, and rose to greet her teacher with a shy, pleased smile.

"And you've been seeing the doctor too, Mrs. Calder?" Eliza said, after she had heard all details of her scholar's illness.

Mrs. Calder folded her hands over her clean white apron. "I hey that," she said importantly. "I hevna been the thing for a lang time, and ma ain doctor juist aye gied me a bottle and said I'd be 'all right in a little.' So Mistress MacQueen brocht her doctor, a skilly doctor he is, and he tell't me that ma kidneys are wrong, and ma hert's weak, and ma blood-pressure is—I dinna mind what."

Eliza stared. So this was the "satisfaction" alluded to by Mrs. MacQueen! It hardly seemed the proper word, but Mrs. Calder seemed in no way cast down by the report.

"I hope the new doctor will make you quite well," she remarked.

"That's mair than I could expect, but I'd like to keep on for a wee while for Jessie's sake . . . She'll be back at the class gin Sabbath."

"I didn't like missing it," said Jessie.

Eliza felt surprised and quite absurdly pleased. She had

thought her scholars came only from a sense of duty.

"Na," said Mrs. Calder, "she was in a way aboot it. Ye're young to be a teacher, but that's mebbe why they like ye—youth draws to youth. Grand meetin's we're hevin' the noo. I'm a wee thing deaf and the speaker hes a fine loud voice, but I'm no sure but that I dinna like oor ain quiet prayer-meetin' on the Wednesday nicht best, wi' Mr. Laidlaw speakin' that friendly-like aboot the auld prophets and the apostles that ye fair feel they were folk like oorsels . . ."

Eliza arrived at Mrs. Stit's house at four-thirty, and was shown into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Stit was a young-looking woman with fluffy fair hair turning grey, and vague, light eyes. She always wore loose garments, frilly about the neck, and had a trick of putting her hand to her mouth after she had made a remark, as if startled at her own temerity. She had a family of three daughters, who had all married young, and all married ministers. Mrs. Stit was often heard to say that her cup was full.

Eliza found her mother there before her, and, with her, her friend Mrs. Learmond. Mrs. Stit had felt it her duty to ask this lady to tea, though she had not cared for her when she met her at Blinkbonny. She feared she lacked charity, and doubted if she were a real Christian.

It amused Eliza to see Mrs. Learmond in the Stits' drawing-room. She was reminded of Geordie's remark when first he had met that lady. "I like her," he had said, and added, "she wouldn't be unkind to eagles," but would give no explanation of his cryptic remark. To-day, Eliza thought, she looked rather like an eagle—an eagle somewhat dazed by the clucking of farmyard fowls. She

was a handsome woman, tall and fresh-coloured, with a pair of adventurous blue eyes that had looked at the world with interest and amusement for nearly eighty years. She had accepted this invitation for civility's sake, but she privately regarded Mrs. Stit Is a very foolish woman, and inwardly marvelled why it was Mrs. Laidlaw liked her.

Mrs. Learmond was merely a sojourner in Glasgow. She belonged to the Straths of Angus, where, the last of the family, she occupied the old house which had come down to her through many generations. In the black years of the War she had found things too difficult, and having been advised by her doctor to winter in Glasgow, took a furnished house in Pollok Road. While there she met Mrs. Laidlaw, and was made free of Blinkbonny, and, to her own immense surprise, after three years was still in Glasgow.

Mr. Stit was standing on the hearthrug with his back to rather a cheerless fire. He was a fat man, growing bald, with a thick neck, and a large round head, which he rolled. He was a man who "never wanted for the asking," and had had a perfect genius for persuading all the most prominent preachers and teachers to come and speak in his church. At the moment he was telling Mrs. Laidlaw about the phenomenal size of his Bible-class and the number of his young communicants. His hands held his sides—he had a way of clutching at his body and squirming—and his head rolled back as he boomed out his tale. Mrs. Laidlaw listened with a dejected air, for Mr. Stit had a way of implying that, in comparison with his church, Martyrs' was but a poor thing, which made her feel both angry and helpless, and she was glad when Mrs. Stit herded them to the dining-room for tea.

The sight of the tea-table cheered her, for she told herself that it was not the sort of tea she gave her friends: nothing home-made—even the jam she suspected of coming from a shop; stale cake, and short-bread soft and rounded at the corners; no cream.

Eliza sat beside Mrs. Learmond, who was bewailing the loss of her most treasured spectacles.

"To lose my specs," she said in her definite, grave tones, "is a great loss to me. I have others, of course, but these were my favourite tortoise-shell ones that I always read with in the evening." She turned to Eliza. "I was brought up, my dear, never to read in the daytime, and I still stick to the habit. Knit, work, write letters, walk, talk—anything you like all day, and in the evening you really enjoy your books and papers. I feel guilty even now if I find myself reading in the morning."

"And where did you lose your spectacles?" Mrs. Stit asked.

"If I knew that," said Mrs. Learmond, "I'd go and get them. No! I'm afraid I must have dropped them in a car, or something silly like that, and I'll never see them again."

Mrs. Stit leaned forward. Her greying fair hair hung rather wispily over her forehead, her light eyes gazed at the guest.

"Have you prayed about it, Mrs. Learmond?" she asked, and put her hand to her mouth.

Mrs. Learmond looked at her for a second or two before she replied. "Mrs. Stit, I have wrestled on my knees with my Maker many times about things that mattered, but . . ."

"Oh, but," Mrs. Stit's hand was at her mouth again, "the Lord loves us to take the *little* trials to Him, all our losses

and disappointments. I had such a lovely little text this morning. It was . . . what was it, Father?"

"I don't remember, Lena."

"Oh yes—*Cast thy burden upon the Lord.* And it was so needed, the dear familiar text, for Janet was really insolent last night when I spoke to her about coming in so late, and I got up feeling *burdened*, but I got strength to go downstairs as blithe as a bird and to greet Janet as I always greet her, just like a *friend.* I said, 'A new day, Janet, for us to fill full to the brim with usefulness, a new leaf all unsullied'."

"And what did Janet say?" asked Mrs. Laidlaw, deeply interested.

"Oh," said Mrs. Stit lightly, "Janet has no outcome, If you know what I mean. I believe she feels much without being able to give expression to her feelings . . . But I do want to hear about your meetings, Mrs. Laidlaw. Are you having good results?"

Mr. Stit addressed Eliza, asking her if she had been reading anything lately, and Eliza, thinking of the books that seemed to make the background of her life a rich tapestry, said, "Nothing special."

"I am thinking," Mr. Stit went on, "of taking one or two popular novels and lecturing on them on the Sunday evenings,—best sellers, as they call them. One can sometimes find a deep inner meaning in those works of fiction, and anyway, they are what the public wants, so therefore of a certain importance."

"Oh, quite," said Eliza politely.

When they were leaving, Mrs. Stit grew arch.

"To think," she said, "that I should have lost all my

girlies! Ah, Mrs. Laidlaw, you must keep your girlie as long as you can. I just wish I had a son to make a nice husband for Eliza."

The face that young woman turned on her hostess was not a pleasing one, and Mrs. Laidlaw hastily withdrew.

As they reached the gate Mrs. Learmond said heavily—

"I believe it would take very little to make that woman's reason topple. Oh, I know that's not a pretty thing to say when I have accepted her hospitality, but I don't like her. I shall ask her to luncheon next week, since she was so civil as to invite me to her house, but I think the acquaintance will go no further. Time is too precious to me now to waste on irrelevant people."

"I like Mrs. Stit," Mrs. Laidlaw said. "I know she's silly, but I think she's good, and anyway I've a weakness for her. Poor soul!"

Mrs. Learmond and Eliza looked at each other and smiled.

Eliza finished her day at the evangelistic meeting in Martyrs'. There was a good attendance, and she noticed that her class was well represented. Maggie Henry was there, singing lustily, *She only touched the hem of His garment.* Maggie liked going to meetings and singing Sankey's hymns, and had several times professed conversion. Eliza, looking at her with new eyes, thought with a shudder that Maggie was like her mother. She had the same oatmeal sort of skin and loose open mouth; she was beginning, too, to get fat. When Eliza shook hands with her at the close, the girl jerked back her head at the preacher, saying, "My he was grand. I go' a second baptism the night."

"I didn't know you had a sister so ill," Eliza said.

"Beenie! Uch ay, she's aye been like that."

"But couldn't something be done? Couldn't you persuade your mother to let her go away where she would get a better chance?"

Maggie looked away, saying, "Uch, I don't know," and Eliza, thinking to herself that she ought to be specially kind to a girl with such a home, turned to speak to a little apple-cheeked creature in brown for whom she had rather a weakness.

"How are you all?" she asked, and received in reply a history of colds and toothache and other ills.

"I'm so sorry—but you look well yourself."

"Oh—me!" the girl smiled cheerily. "I get off awfu' safe."

Eliza smiled in sympathy as she saw her join a waiting young man and march off with him happily, then, turning, found her father at her side.

"Are you going home with your mother in the tram, or walking?"

"It's a good night. I'd rather stride home with you, Daddy."

"All right. Come along and we'll go to bed with some fresh air in our lungs."

They walked through quiet back streets, glad of silence and the darkness. Suddenly Eliza said—

"I simply don't know, Father, how you stick it."

Mr. Laidlaw, whose thoughts had been far away from the toiling city, turned to his daughter with mild astonishment.

"Stick what?" he asked.

Eliza threw out her hands. "Everything—trailing up and down dirty stairs, visiting people in kitchens—you who

love beauty. These meetings—all the cant phrases they use. One of my class girls was there tonight: she told me she had got a second baptism! This afternoon I was at her house, such a house as I never imagined existed. Her mother seemed hardly human, a great gross creature, half clothed and rather drunk. In the bed there was a sick child so utterly neglected that she seemed like some little wild animal. I don't know how old she is, she never spoke, but her mother said before her, calmly, almost with satisfaction, that she wasn't going to get better. I don't believe they want her to get better. Can nothing be done?"

They were passing a lamp-post and Mr. Laidlaw stopped and took out a small notebook. "What's the address? Henry, 68 Paisley Street—something will certainly be done. Yes! there are some very bad places in Glasgow."

"And yet," Eliza went on, "I went next to a house in quite as bad a locality—the close was awful as I went in—and it was a sort of paradise in comparison, clean and bright—a place you could eat and sleep in. Mrs. Calder, Jessie's grandmother, seemed such a decent little wisp of a woman, so small and thin, as if she had worked herself away to a thread, but quite undefeated."

"Mrs. Calder! Oh, she's a great friend of mine, she comes from Gala Water. Yes, it's not much good talking about better houses for the poor, until you can manage to put some self-respect into the people themselves. If you put your friend Mrs. Henry into one of those clean new houses she'd probably have it a pigsty in a week. On the other hand, a decent, God-fearing woman can, in the worst slum, make her house shine like a good deed in a naughty world. You must work from the heart out . . . Did you not enjoy

the meeting tonight?"

"No," said Eliza, "I didn't. Mother would say I didn't go in the proper spirit . . . But I was trying to forget the smell of Mrs. Henry's kitchen. I'm sick of everything. Life in Glasgow is about as ugly and drab as—as that gasometer."

Walter Laidlaw laughed. "Poor little 'Liza. You would like to remake the world and fill it with people with Oxford accents, well versed in *belles-lettres.* A genteel world, my daughter!"

Eliza pinched her father's arm in protest, but he went on. "And a pretty ghastly one! I can't imagine anything duller, for no one would be more than half alive."

"*Father* . . . They couldn't be worse, anyway, than Mrs. Stit and a lot of the people we know. Talk about dullness! The only person I've seen to-day with a ray of light about her is that nice little Phemie Brown who told me just now at the hall door that she 'got off aw safe,' and walked away with such a satisfied smile, 'cleeking' with her young man."

Walter Laidlaw laughed. "My dear, if you knew it, you are very fortunate to be placed as you are. You've the chance of knowing intimately all sorts and conditions of people. Don't be too hard on your mother's friends and mine. Remember that if age seems to you tiresome and narrow and didactic, youth seems to age ignorant and complacent and, sometimes, cruel. And don't be wilfully blind. Life in Glasgow is drab, you say, but beauty isn't far to seek. Don't you remember what Bunyan said? 'A stately palace the name of which was Beautiful and *it stood just by the highway-side.*' Well, and what is Jim's new story like ? I haven't had time to look at it yet."

Late that evening Mr. and Mrs. Laidlaw sat by the fire having their half-hour of peace at the end of the long day.

"I didn't enjoy going to Mrs. Stit's this afternoon," Mrs. Laidlaw was saying. "Mrs. Learmond doesn't like her, and Eliza was positively rude, but I must say Mrs. Stit is a sickness with her 'girlies.' I'm glad we have no assistant for Eliza to marry—I can't think why all the Stit girls wanted to marry their father's assistants, but their mother is more than pleased."

"Madame Light Mind," said her husband.

"Oh no, Walter, she's a spiritually minded woman if she is silly."

Mr. Laidlaw began to roll up his watch.

" 'I met a fool',"he quoted meditatively.

His wife was putting the room ready for Mary in the morrning.

"What did you say, Walter?"

"A fool i' the forest."

"Eliza's discontented," said Mrs. Laidlaw, folding back the rug; "girls often are when they first grow up. I'm ashamed that I find it so hard to be patient with her." She sighed. "Children are a great responsibility. I've often heavy thoughts about Jim at Oxford with that craze of his for the theatre—and Geordie's broken the garden-gate again."

CHAPTER 6

"Man's life is but a working day."
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

MRS. LAIDLAW was a very beaver for industry. No one ever saw her unoccupied, and when she went on a holiday she used all her spare time writing long letters to less favoured friends. She was often heard to sigh for leisure, but it is doubtful if she would have enjoyed it after the first half-hour.

She was not only busy, but she was of an extraordinary and constant kindness. She had a bag which people said must know its own way about, it went so continually on errands of mercy. And it was not only to the poor that she gave gifts; she realized that the rich are often in need of a comforter, and she had always something to bestow.

Her hospitality was as large as her means would allow. If she had six people coming to a meal, then she thought she might as well have nine; if nine, why not twelve? The table held twelve with a crush.

"But why," Eliza would ask, "do you want to ask these people? They're both dull and upsetting."

"Oh, poor souls!" said Mrs. Laidlaw. To her the world was full of poor souls.

If any one was ill in her own household she immediately feared the worst, and it was not cheering for the invalid to be told, "Yes, you must go to bed at once, and if it's the bad kind of influenza you'll probably never rise again." On the other hand, calamity, with her, was not full of words; when

real trouble came she was dumb, opening not her mouth.

The church was her great anxiety. To hear her mourn that Martyrs' was rapidly losing ground, that its few remaining members would be leaving for out-lying suburbs at the next term, that probably her husband's health would fail, and if that did not happen, his conservative, unprogressive ways would rapidly bring the church to ruin, was to believe her a professed pessimist. But her husband and family knew better than to attach any importance to her plaints.

Jim said, "Mother only does it as a precaution, to ward off the attention of the fates from her household. At heart she is a pagan." A statement which brought forth an indignant denial from the maligned lady. There was no doubt that Mrs. Laidlaw simply lived for her husband and children, desiring the best for them both in this world and the next, but, with her, love was the reverse of blind. She saw their faults with startling clearness, and set herself determinedly to mend them. She had a habit of holding up other families as an example which was singularly enraging to her own.

"Yes," she would say, coming in from calling on some one, "Mrs. Thornton must be a proud woman, with her sons doing so well at school, and Pamela getting such high praise for her music. I did hope I would have a daughter who cared for music, it's such a refining influence in a home where there are boys . . . And Pamela's such a good girl to her mother—makes her take breakfast in bed every morning, she tells me, and brings it in so daintily with a rose on the tray." This last with a glance at Eliza, who would reply grimly, "I don't see you, Mother, lying in bed

in the morning dallying with a rose. Mrs. Thornton was made for that sort of thing. She can wear a boudoir cap and delights in bed-jackets. Your cap is generally under the bed."

And Mrs. Laidlaw, recognizing the truth of the statement, would finish with a laugh. That was the great thing about Mrs. Laidlaw, she could always laugh at herself.

One February morning when the spring-cleaning—always absurdly early at Blinkbonny—was practically over, Mrs. Laidlaw, after she had stood at the front door and watched Rob and Geordie set off for school, descended to the kitchen to make some pastry. She was a famous baker, and Mary-from-Skye got many a hint as she busied herself about the kitchen. Mary had only been two years at Blinkbonny and seemed almost a newcomer, for her predecessors, two sisters from Arbroath, had been nineteen years with the Laidlaws. When circumstances necessitated their going home, Mrs. Laidlaw decided that they must try to run the house with one good general servant, the War having sadly diminished their small private income as well as having raised the cost of living.

It would have been difficult for any girl to follow Maggie and Annie, those peerless ones, to whom the family's well-being had been as their own, but their successor Martha—ill-named indeed—had no intention of trying. They had not seen her, having trusted a friend who recommended her, and when she came up to prayers the first night Mrs. Laidlaw almost swooned—the bobbed hair, the abbreviated skirts, the transparent stockings, the impudent voice! She had tried to be kind.

"Had you a comfortable journey, Martha?"

"Yes."

"I hope you will find everything all right. It's very trying, I know, to come to a new place among strange people, but I do hope you will be happy with us."

Silence.

"You light the kitchen fire first in the morning and then come up here."

"Right-o!" said Martha.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Laidlaw, shocked into courage, "you must never answer like that. Say 'Yes, mum'."

It was hopeless from the first. Martha was lazy, she was pert, she was dirty, she objected to going twice to church, made excuses for not coming up to prayers, and left, asserting that if she stayed any longer in that house she would be a "fair missionary," and Mrs. Laidlaw had to throw herself on the tender mercies of a servants' registry, a place she had never before had occasion to visit.

A modest little advertisement in the *Herald* from some one who wished "a good home" was replied to at once.

"Though it's no use," Mrs. Laidlaw declared; "we'll never hear more of it." But she was wrong, for Mary appeared.

She came shyly into the room, looking so decent in her long skirt and plain hat that Mrs. Laidlaw longed there and then to grapple her to them with hooks of steel. She had come from Skye, she told them, to look for a situation, and was staying with an aunt in Greenock. She was twenty-eight and a good plain cook, and had been in a manse in Portree for five years.

She had few questions to ask.

"When do you take your dinner, mum?"

She was told one o'clock, and replied, "And a very good

time too." She went away, promising to return two days later, but the Laidlaws had no real hope until a small trunk arrived, bound with tarry rope and borne by two stalwart young men who explained that they were cousins of Mary, also from Skye.

When Mary came up to prayers that first night, holding her Bible in her hand, a decent cap on her well-brushed hair, her new mistress could have wept with sheer gratitude—and after two years she was still grateful. Of course, like other people, Mary had her faults. Though she could speak English she thought in Gaelic, which made her slow in taking things in. Also, she was given on the slightest provocation to take fits of silent laughter. These attacks generally came on when she was admitting visitors, and she would stumble upstairs, throw open the drawing-room door, and announce in a voice shaken with mirth, "Mrs. Laidlaw, mum, here's some ladies to see you," and retire almost overcome.

While her mistress baked, Mary told her long stories about her friends from Skye, especially about "Angus McVeecar, ma cousin," who was "that like King George you couldna tell the two apart."

Every Thursday evening Mary went out to meet her Skye friends somewhere about Jamaica Bridge. On Sunday she attended Martyrs' morning and afternoon, but in the evening went to her own church, the Free Presbyterians.

This morning, after putting her pies into the oven, Mrs. Laidlaw changed the papers in the dining-room cupboards and in the sideboard drawers. It was almost a craze with her, keeping drawers perfectly tidy, and Eliza privately thought it most unnecessary. There was hardly time after

that for her to read the *Herald* before the early dinner, but she did manage to glance through the Births, Marriages, and Deaths, and scan the page which contained news of the churches. During dinner she was distinctly distrait, for that afternoon she was to preside at a missionary committee meeting, which meant that she would have to open the proceedings with prayer.

"I don't know how I'll get on," she said pensively, helping out tapioca pudding; "it's in the Kemps' drawing-room, and there's something very formal about Mrs. Kemp; you'd almost think there was something critical about the very furniture. I've written out what I want to say—I don't know whether that was right or not, perhaps I should have waited for guidance—but if I stick, my paper will be no use to me, I'll just have to stop. And my voice shakes so. I wish I had Mrs. Kemp's freedom; she stands up and pours out petitions in a way that leaves me gasping. However—I'm glad the day has come. It'll be all over in another two hours, and I'll be a thankful woman if I get through."

She went upstairs to dress, and came down looking quite smart in what Geordie called her "doggy coat" and a jaunty little hat. Her lips were murmuring the words she meant to say.

Presently she asked, as she sat warming her feet, "Are you going out, Eliza? No? It's as well that you should be in when the boys come home. Mary tells me they rushed out again yesterday. See that they take off their boots before tea . . . If I get through all right I may make some calls after the meeting . . . It's fine to think we haven't to go out to-night. I'll get some sewing done—if only I had this meeting off my head! . . . Well, I'd better go. Am I all right?" She

turned herself round for inspection. "Oh, I may as well take the bead-bag that Jimmie gave me at Christmas. Run up for it, will you? The top drawer in my wardrobe—and put in one of my new handkerchiefs with some lavender water on it. I've an ordinary one for using in my pocket."

At last she was off. Her daughter stood on the doorsteps and cried, "You'll come home walking on air," but she shook her head despondently as she went out of the gate.

No sooner had Eliza seen her mother depart than she slipped into an armchair by the study fire, her fat green Shakespeare on her knee, and sighed with pleasure to think that she had two undisturbed hours to browse through the works of the Bard.

She was treading the green wood with Rosalind when a violent battering and slamming and shouting warned her of the return of her brothers. Marvelling at the swift foot of time when one is pleasantly occupied, she went out to the hall and found Rob and Geordie engaged in fierce argument.

"Don't champ at each other like wild horses," she admonished them.

"Where's Mother?" they asked.

"Gone out."

"Isn't she coming into tea? Aw—here's Father anyway."

Mr. Laidlaw was coming up the gravel walk, coming rather slowly, for he had climbed many long stairs in the afternoon, and besides, he had to stop and greet each snowdrop, each grey-green daffodil-shoot that had ventured out to meet the pale spring sun.

"Well, folkies," he said, as he came into the dining-room, "where's your mother?"

Eliza from her place behind the tea-tray laughed.

"Daddy, that's always your first question when you enter the house." She poured him out his big breakfast-cup of tea and carried it to him. "Have you forgotten? Mother's gone to the missionary meeting. She said if she didn't break down she would pay some calls before coming home." With a glance at her wrist-watch she added, "I'm sure it's all right or she would have been back. It's funny that Mother should worry so. She often has to open meetings with prayer. I think she was nervous to-day because Mrs. Kemp's so good at it."

"I bet she's not so good as Mother," said Geordie.

"Quite right," said his father, "but there's no occasion to bet about it.—How did the Latin go to-day, Rob?"

Rob's mouth was full at the moment, but after an interval he was understood to say that it had been all right.

"Father," said Geordie very earnestly, "a wee cat came into our classroom to-day and ran about and chewed my finger. I did want to bring it home."

"Poor little beast," said Eliza, "did it look starved?"

"I don't know," said Geordie, "but it chewed my finger."

They were in the study, and Walter Laidlaw was playing the penny whistle, a habit of his in the half-hour after tea, when Rob gave a shout, "Here's mother!" and rushed out to bring her in.

"Well," said Eliza, "did you put up a good petition? You've a flushed, triumphant look."

"Oh, Eliza, is that a way to talk," her Mother rebuked her, but her tone was not severe.

"Were you the best, Mother?" Geordie asked.

"You children seem to have no reverence," Mrs. Laidlaw

complained. "You shouldn't ask people if they prayed well. It's shocking. I got through. I tried to forget the people and remember only to whom I was speaking. Mrs. Kemp said to me afterwards when she handed me some tea—she gave us a beautiful tea, hot scones and sandwiches and every variety of cake—she said quite low, 'A beautiful prayer, Mrs. Laidlaw.' I thought it was very nice of her. Mrs. Stit was beside me and heard her . . . She had on a new dress, Eliza, and took her coat off in the hall; very nice, but always 'hashy' about the neck."

Mr. Laidlaw was still playing, and his lilting measure made an odd accompaniment to the talk; Rob, who had rather a sweet voice, sang a line now and again.

"And where else have you been?" Eliza asked.

"I just looked in for a few minutes at the Wests'—as usual, Mrs. West is in sore domestic trouble. Her cook has given notice, and the table-maid, just when she thought she had got comfortably settled at last. I was sorry for her. She's a lonely creature in that big house. She implored me to stay longer, for she says Meta won't allow her to have her old friends, and she feels so dull. I can't stand Meta's long nose and affected ways. In the effort to conceal her Glasgow accent she speaks like a foreigner. She says she never sees you now, but of course she is so much engaged. I said, 'Well, Meta, Eliza's there when you want to see her.' . . . Then, when I was so near, I went into the Turners'. It's always such a refreshment to me to go to that house. That wise, sweet old woman sitting there in her white cap and shawl, and her two daughters asking nothing better than to have her to attend to, and her sons settled all round with their wives and children, making a court for her. Mrs.

Turner is blessed among women. I can imagine no happier end to a woman's life: to be honoured and loved and, above all, wanted, up to the end as she is! When I think of all the women I know who have given up their homes because of servant troubles and live about in rooms and hotels! What a life! No worries perhaps, but no interests either. Of course it is often the only possible plan, but what a finish for women who have been house-proud and hospitable all their lives! Mrs. Turner is still interested in everything that goes on; she would have me taste the newly-made marmalade. She and Agnes and Bessie were sitting by such a good fire, with the tea-table drawn up, talking away to each other as if they hadn't met for weeks. They're such good friends, the three. And John has given his mother the best gramophone he could get, and James had bought her a wonderful quilted silk coat, and Robert has got a grand big car and wants to take her a drive every fine day; and Bessie and Agnes tell you all this so proudly, while their mother listens smiling and says, 'All this fuss about an old woman'!"

"Mrs. Turner was always a kind woman," said Eliza. "We were never sorry to be sent an errand to the Turners' house. She always had sweets for us and would never hear that the boys were wild or bad, and Miss Bessie and Miss Agnes are nice kind of spinsters; they haven't that sort of dissatisfied, hungry look."

Geordie, who was lying on his face on the carpet drawing a picture, suddenly sniggered to himself.

"Spinsters are hungry," he said. "Here's you, Eliza, hungry like a wolf!"

"Let's see," said Rob. "O-oh—Eliza as a hungry spinster!"

The door opened and Mary, consumed with laughter,

appeared. Mr. Laidlaw laid down his whistle.

"Here's Mrs. Learmond," he said. "Get up, boys, and stop fooling."

"I've come for exactly twenty minutes," said the new-corner. "I couldn't resist running in, for I get dowie sitting by myself, but . . ."

"Twenty minutes!" cried Mrs. Laidlaw, as Eliza wheeled in the most comfortable chair. "What nonsense! Actually we haven't to go out to-night, and we're only too delighted to see you. I'll just run up and take off my things—it's a great mistake to sit down when one comes in—and then I'll give you all the news. Bring in the mending-basket, Rob, so that we can talk with a clear conscience.—Now, look after Mrs. Learmond."

In a few minutes Mrs. Laidlaw was back in the study, and there followed an hour such as Mrs. Learmond loved, with the boys doing their home-work, with intervals of puppy-like tumbling and yapping; Eliza by way of mending, but often dreaming with her hands idle; and Mrs. Laidlaw sewing rapidly as she told of all the things that had amused and interested her during the day . . .

"There's the postman," said Eliza. "Jim's letter should come to-night.—Yes, here it is," as Mary came in with letters on a salver.

"Read it aloud, Eliza," her mother said, folding up a mended garment.

So Eliza read Jim's account to his mother of his days, a record of work and play, of people he had met, of books he had read, finishing with the news that he had got a sketch accepted by *Blackwood's Magazine.*

Eliza squealed with delight. "Oh, Mother, isn't that

splendid? Blackwood's!"

"Hooray!" Geordie shouted.

"Blackwood's!" said Mrs. Learmond. "I've taken it all my life. That's great news. I never saw a house like this: there's always something exciting happening. Well, I must go or I shall have Goodenough coming for me."

"How is Goodenough?" Mrs. Laidlaw asked.

Mrs. Learmond pursed her lips and shook her head.

"*Thrawn*," she said—"very. One of her periodical fits of discontent. Gowrie is all that is perfect just now and Glasgow all that is bad. The dairyman has insulted her, she says, but I expect she hurt his feelings first by telling him his milk wasn't fit to drink and his cream what we call 'skimmed milk' at Gowrie! I wish Goodenough wouldn't start vendettas with the tradespeople. I do think I must send her home."

"Oh," Eliza said, "you mustn't. She'd break her heart, and you'd miss horribly not having some one to contradict you! I don't say she is much use as a maid, but she's a comfortable-looking body to have going in and out of your room when you've got bronchitis . . . And she doesn't really hate Glasgow, you know."

"Of course she doesn't," Mrs. Learmond agreed. "Why, when the three, Mrs. Rough so cook-like and fat, and Thomson so serenely genteel, and Goodenough set off together to visit 'the Pictures,' or to see the shops, they're as happy as children. They will miss all that when we go home . . . But I'm getting short-tempered in my old age, and when Goodenough grumbles I speak sharply, and then comes first a hurt silence and then distant politeness for a time! But I'd be a lonely woman without those faithful

souls! They've been with me quite a long bit of the way, and I never could help getting fond of servants. Now I must go . . ."

Rob and Geordie went home with their friend who knew so much about things that really mattered, like the ways of birds and beasts, and Mrs. Laidlaw tidied her work-basket and said—

"Well, I dreaded this day and it's over. It's odd one is never as thankful as one expects to be. I thought I'd be so relieved and happy if I got through, but I'm just thinking about my Sunday class. Give me over my paper, Eliza . . . It's somewhere on the writing- table."

Eliza looked about—"Is this it beginning 'A slight eminence to the east of Jerusalem—'?"

"That's it—Olivet." And her mother took the paper and began to murmur it over to herself.

CHAPTER 7

"But the bairns little think what the auld folk are thinkin'."
GEORGE MACDONALD.

IT was March, and the dust, a peck of which is said to be worth a king's ransom, was being blown, prodigally, in clouds, by a merciless east wind which seemed to wither what it touched.

Walter Laidlaw was walking homewards from the city, his shoulders more bent than usual. He was feeling greatly discouraged. Some time before, one of his young men, a clever attractive fellow, had got into serious trouble, and with immense pains the minister had got him a chance to start again, to remake his life. The boy had been most penitent, most grateful for the leniency shown him, and all seemed going well, but he had fallen again, and this time there could be no condonation. He was tried and sent to jail.

This bleak March day Mr. Laidlaw had been visiting the boy's mother, a widow and poor, who had brought up her family decently and well, and it was the recollection of her face and her words that seemed to bow him to the ground.

"It's no use, Mr. Laidlaw," she had said. "George is like his father, he'll break in your hand. It's an awful thing to say about your man, but I was thankful when mine died and the dread was over . . . I always feared for George, he was so plausible, so good at saying he was sorry, and never to be trusted. You've done all you could and I'm grateful. The fault is mine bringing him into the world. I married

with glamour in my eyes, and when that went there was nothing left. And it's George that has to pay for my fault—Ay, it's true: *The Lord thy God is a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children.*"

And Walter Laidlaw had found nothing to say, seeing before him the bright-faced boy with his weak mouth. Marred in the making . . .

As his father trudged homewards Jim Laidlaw stood whistling, looking out of the drawing-room window at Blinkbonny, his hands in his pockets.

"Grim day," he was saying. "I hope the voice of the turtle'll be heard in the land before we start on our walking tour."

There was a fire in the drawing-room because people were expected to tea, and Eliza was curled up on the sofa with a book. She was feeling utterly contented, she had Jim and a new book, and an idle afternoon to enjoy both. Eliza liked people to come to tea, because then she was not expected to go out and collect, or carry pots of jelly and fresh eggs to sick folk—her usual afternoon's employment—but could put on something pretty and laze by the fire till the visitors arrived.

At this time in her life it amazed Eliza to hear people exclaim at the swift flight of the hours, and the difficulty of finding time to do things. It seemed to her that the days were very long and empty, and that great tracts of time lay all about her.

As Jim spoke she looked up. "But you're not going for a long time yet!"

"A week from to-day exactly," said Jim.

"So soon?" She looked back over her shoulder at the

swaying trees. "But the weather has time to change. Are you and Meade—Mr. Meade going alone?"

"Yes, he's frightfully keen. He doesn't know the Border district at all, and I want to show him Ettrick and Yarrow and round by Hermitage. It'll be fine if only the weather is decent; we'll sleep at village inns wherever our fancy pleases."

Eliza nodded and asked, "Where is Mr. Meade now?"

"At home, I expect. He comes north next Wednesday, and I meet him at Carstairs."

"Shouldn't you ask him to come here for a visit? Mother thinks you should, specially as you stayed with him."

"I know." Jim went and sat on the sofa beside his sister. "Of course it's frightfully good of Mother, and I daresay Meade would enjoy himself and all that, but— You see, he's used to such a different sort of life. We live decently and self-respectingly, but we haven't any trimmings, so to speak. At King John's Lodge—I told you, didn't I, that King John is supposed to have gone there after Runnymede?—I had the jolliest room, with a big fire and chintz-covered chairs, and a bookcase full of books, and a writing-table with all the tippiest dodges in electric lights, and tea in bed in the morning, and a footman to lay out my clothes; and my bath turned on in a glistening white bathroom. What I mean to say is you can't imagine a chap used to all that—so used, indeed, that he is quite unconscious of it—sleeping in our spare bedroom and struggling for a bath in the morning, in a sort of Marathon, and Skye Mary heaving and laughing . . ."

"I know," said Eliza thoughtfully, "but mightn't he enjoy the difference?"

"He might, but I don't want to be the one to give him that new experience." Jim got up and stood with his back to the fire, his heels on the fender. "Call me a snob if you like: perhaps I am one. Meade knows that my father's a poor clergyman and that I have to make every penny I spend, but he doesn't know what suburban life in Glasgow is like, and I don't propose to enlighten him. Lord! what an ugly room this is!"

"Ugly!" Eliza was startled. This was almost sacrilege. The room that was the apple of her mother's eye, with its good Axminster carpet, its solid furniture so well made and polished, its silver and its ornaments, its photographs—above all, its photographs! Mrs. Laidlaw had a perfect passion for photographs, and as every woman who claimed her as a friend wanted her to have her children at every stage, the room was simply strewn with examples of the photographic art.

It had never occurred to Eliza to criticize the room, but now she tried to see it with Jim's eyes. It was very like Mrs. Stit's room, and all the other drawing-rooms in Pollok Road, but it was certainly strikingly unlike Mrs. Neish's. But then Mrs. Neish was an artist, her room was bound to be unusual. Who else would have pale cream walls and paint and curtains ("What will it look like after a fog?" Mrs. Laidlaw had asked in scorn), a blue-and-white Chinese carpet, walls bare, except for one mirror and one picture, the colour coming from vivid cushions, bits of china, and flowers? There were neither photographs nor silver ornaments.

But even as she admitted to herself that Jim was right and the room was ugly, Eliza felt resentful. Her mother was

proud of the poor old room, and it somehow seemed mean and treacherous to look at it and talk of it disparagingly. Her father, too, often stood on the hearth-rug and said, "A very well-proportioned room: I seldom see a nicer!" That, of course, was her father's way with everything that was his.

Eliza turned to her brother with protest in her voice—

"Not ugly, Jimmie: it's a pleasant room and homelike."

Her brother laughed. "Yes, the odd thing is that it is a pleasant room, but there isn't a single thing of beauty in it for all that. But it's better than the dining-room, anyway. The pictures there—the illuminated addresses and the Deacon's Trip. When was the house furnished? About 1895, I suppose. There were plenty of people preaching aestheticism then."

"It was about the ugliest time for clothes. Mother has kept one or two of her trousseau dresses and they're terrible, with great puffed sleeves stiffened with buckram, and umbrella skirts. Mother declares that people looked very nice in them, and she positively hates the straight-up-and-down dresses worn now . . . Then, everybody seems to have thought first of what was good and lasting."

"And yet," said Jim, "at that time Aubrey Beardsley was alive and the *Yellow Book* was coming out."

"Yes," said Eliza, "but Mother and her friends didn't bother about such things, and Father never cares much for new writers or modern artists. Shakespeare and Sir Walter and Raeburn are good enough for him. Isn't it queer about families? People have children, and bring them up as they were brought up, and expect them to be pretty much the same and—"

"And they're not," Jim broke in. " 'Liza, d'you think Father and Mother mind me not going in for the church?"

"Mother minds. Father doesn't say anything. And I don't see why Mother should want you to have a church, for I'm sure she finds Martyrs' a pretty hard struggle. If it were only the preaching and visiting, but there is the constant intimating of collections (poor Father does so hate to ask for money!) and the effort to keep everybody sweet, and the striving to keep up the numbers . . . It's all very well for ministers like Mr. Stit; they enjoy it and make a success of it, just as they would make a success of any other business, but— Oh, I don't know . . . There's the bell! The party's arrived! Where can Mother be?"

With that Mrs. Laidlaw dashed into the room and sank, panting, into a chair, crying, "Quick, Eliza, a book!"

"Hostess discovered reading," murmured Jim, who noticed with delight that the book his mother appeared absorbed in was *The Crowning Phase of the Critical Philosophy.*

It was not a particularly enlivening party, consisting as it did of an elderly and retired schoolmaster named Mr. Galston and his equally elderly and retired wife, and a Mrs. Service, the widow of an elder in Martyrs', who, being left alone and not too well provided for, spent much of her time at Blinkbonny. She was sixty-five, tall and spare, with a slight stoop and a handsome Roman nose. Her hair, which she wore parted smoothly, was getting a little thin, a fact which, combined with the Roman nose, made Rob and Geordie allude to her as "Perchance the bald old eagle," a line from a favourite poem of theirs called *The Death of Moses.* They meant no disrespect, indeed they were much

attached to the lady, who, despite her somewhat prim demeanour, had a sympathetic understanding of bad boys. In truth, the whole Laidlaw family had an affection for Mrs. Service. Her husband had been one of those loyal sons of the church who are as nails fastened in a sure place, and Walter Laidlaw and his wife would never forget what they owed to Robert Service's self-sacrificing labours, and for that reason alone they would have wished to show kindness to his widow. Every Friday she came to them after breakfast and spent the whole day. It was something for the lonely woman to look forward to, and she was not encouraged to feel burdened with gratitude, for Mrs. Laidlaw often told her that she was much more help to them than they were to her. She had clever hands and liked to sit and mend and make over-garments; she was a good nurse, and full of old-fashioned remedies for burns and sprains and other ills; also she was a soothing presence in the house and kept the peace between Rob and Geordie. The Laidlaws never tried to entertain her; they came and went and she sat there sewing placidly by the fire, or reading by the window, or—in spring and summer-time—wandering in the garden. Like Mr. Laidlaw, she knew almost every plant in it and loved them all.

The presence at tea of Mr. Galston, once a schoolmaster and still obviously a disciplinarian, chastened the two boys into good behaviour, and all was peace and quiet accord.

Mrs. Galston was a small woman who nodded acquiescence to whatever her husband said. Both she and Mrs. Service ate in a very genteel manner and took tiny sips of tea.

Mrs. Laidlaw urged Mrs. Galston to try the home-baked

scones and cakes, but that lady merely shook her head with a small sad smile, saying, "I've an appetite like a bird."

Eliza, meeting Jim's eye, seized a plate and begged Mrs. Service in a distraught way to have a cookie, but she shook her head and said, "Nothing of to-day's baking for me, Miss Eliza. I'm enjoying the toast," and turned to listen to what the minister was saying. Truth to tell, he was not saying much, for he had little in common with Mr. Galston, who seemed to disapprove of most things. Eliza disliked the way he had of clearing his throat, and his thin, dry voice. "He must have shouted a lot before he got such an exhausted voice," she thought.

Jim made an effort to interest him in Oxford, but got little out of him but "H'mm—indeed!"

When the couple had gone, much wrapped up about the throat, Mr. Laidlaw, fingering his dear whistle, said ruefully, "I wish that snuffy old dominie hadn't come to Martyrs'; I can see that he'll be nothing but a nuisance."

"Walter," said his wife, "you really are a most unwise speaker sometimes—what is Mrs. Service to think of her minister?"

" 'Deed," said that lady, "I was thinking very much the same myself. I doubt Mr. Galston'll be difficult. I just hope they'll not put him on for an elder. He's got a sort of maleecious face, ayhe!"

Jim nodded at her. "He has indeed, 'a damned disinheriting countenance'."

Mr. Laidlaw broke into a strathspey and Mrs. Service jigged her head delightedly as he shrilly piped.

"And now," he said, laying down his whistle, "I must be off to the Deacons' Court."

"Will you be late?" his wife asked.

"Oh, I think not. I'll hurry them up as much as I can, you may depend on that."

"Yes, but don't be too brusque with them, Walter. They like to have their say out. And try to conciliate Mr. Reith if he's in a perverse mood."

"I'm in one myself," said her husband grimly. "Good-night, Mrs. Service; haste ye back. Goodnight, boys."

It was late before he came in.

"Was it a quiet meeting?" his wife asked.

"Oh, quite," he spoke wearily.

"Did they bring up about the new hall?"

"Yes. Reith talks foolishly, he lacks common sense."

"Poor soul!" said Mrs. Laidlaw. "There's nothing worrying you, is there, Walter?"

Walter Laidlaw stretched out his hands to the fire as if he felt suddenly cold.

"Oh no," he said; then, "I went to see Mrs. Grant to-day. George is in Barlinnie Jail."

Mrs. Laidlaw had a sudden vision of the young handsome face that she had so often watched with interest.

"Oh, Walter!" she said. "If it had been Jim! That poor mother!"

Her husband looked into the fire. "Marred in the making," he said.

CHAPTER 8

"It fell about the Lammas time
When the muir-men win their hay."
The Ballad of Otterburn.

WITH the coming of spring most of the week-night meetings stopped in Martyrs', and soon a summer peace fell on the old church. The Blinkbonny garden became bright with lilac and hawthorn, and the herbaceous borders bloomed bravely.

July came, and every one who could afford it sailed blithely down the Clyde, or went farther afield, to Blackpool or the Isle of Man, leaving the city quiet and clean and pleasant.

In the beginning of July the Laidlaws departed, as was their custom, to a farmhouse in the Borders—Corhope by name—which had belonged to the family for generations.

Jim, who had been staying with people in Surrey, joined them there, very full of the charm of his new friends, and filled with ambitions to remould his family nearer to his heart's desire. After he had depressed Eliza to the dust and roused all that was worst in Rob and Geordie, his mother thought it time to interfere, and pointed out to her eldest son that he was behaving in a bumptious and priggish manner which could not be tolerated. Jim was at first surprised that his well-meant efforts had given offence, and then penitent. As his mother had often remarked throughout the twenty-two years of his life, "Jim is easily quelled." She usually added darkly, "Eliza is different."

It seemed to Eliza that for the first time she realized what this annual holiday meant to her father. It almost hurt her to see his enjoyment, and one day she said to her mother and Jim as they sat in the garden together—

"Have you noticed how *terribly* Father enjoys Corhope? It isn't fair that he should have to live and work in Glasgow when he'd be so happy in a country manse, with a big garden and a little church across the road, and nothing to see but the hills and the sky, and the burns and the white roads winding among the heather. It's time he stopped trudging through dirty close-mouths and up and down long stairs. Couldn't we make him leave Glasgow, Mother?"

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head. "He wouldn't be happy in the bonniest place if he felt he ought to be working in the town. And it isn't as if he weren't happy in Glasgow. He is fond of his people, and he gets pleasure out of the smallest things."

"Daddy's very philosophic," said Eliza, "but that's not to say he enjoys the dull and ugly;" while Jim, lying on his back, staring up into the sun, broke in with, "I'm all against Father going on too long. I want him to have a leisure time when he's young enough to enjoy it."

"I'm fifty," his mother said quietly, "and your father is ten years older. You're twenty-two, Jim, with all your way to make. I fear it will be a long time before you can help us to retire."

Jim said, "Not so very long, perhaps. I've been jolly lucky lately. You'd be surprised how much I get for these magazine stories here and in America."

"What about your play?" Eliza asked. "I wish you'd hurry up with that."

"Oh, that," said Jimmie. "I was a young ass to talk so glibly about it . . . I hadn't realized the depths of my ignorance. I can make up any amount of things, but some things you need to have first-hand knowledge of. I'm finding out. I accept invitations now (though it's a confounded waste of time), and I watch and note . . ."

Eliza laughed. "Oh, Jimmie, you do make yourself out a horrible sort of Barrie-ish young man, rising from *Takk-aft-the-big-coals, David* in the first act to ducal drawing-rooms in the third! I should like to be there to see you. Enter naïve young Scot with pink ingenuous face, who repays the kind hostess who is trying to put him at his ease by studying all her mannerisms and small affectations! How do you know that the said hostess isn't studying you for a book with a naïve young Scots hero? Everybody writes now—"

"Mother," said Jim, turning round and leaning on one elbow, "have you noticed that our good Eliza is developing a tart tongue? She who used to watch and say nothing!"

Mrs. Laidlaw looked down at her son and daughter from her seat in a garden chair, and replied somewhat irrelevantly, "This is the day of the young. In my youth all the honour was given to age and experience, but now, it seems, the less you know the better. You can hardly be too young. No sooner is one youth lauded to the skies as a writer or a preacher or a poet than a still younger one is treading on his heels. I do hope neither you nor Eliza will get too puffed up in your own conceit. The older you grow the more you will realize your ignorance—at least that has been my experience. As for plays, I'm thankful to say I know nothing about them, but it doesn't seem to me a nice thing to go to people's houses on purpose to study them and

perhaps laugh at them. But I daresay my notions of what constitutes good manners are quite out of date," and she took up the book that lay on her lap and began to read diligently.

"Aha, Jimmie—crushed!" said Eliza.

Jim laughed up at his mother. "I'm being badly used by you and 'Liza . . . Why are you so bitter about youth, Motherkin? You're not very old in years yourself, and in spirit you're exactly seventeen. Regard, please, these two heirs of the ages. What ruffians they look!"

Rob and Geordie were coming in at the garden-gate straight from the hayfield, where they had spent their morning forking. They wore no hats, and had evidently been rolling in the hay, for bits of clover and grass among their ruffled locks gave them a distraught, Ophelia-like look. Their legs were bare, scratched and sunburnt; tennis-shoes (once white), jerseys and trousers much the worse for wear, completed their toilets. Between them was another boy—Willie Ritchie, the ploughman's son.

"Well, Willie," Mrs. Laidlaw greeted him, "how are you? This is the first time I've seen you this year. You're growing tall. What are you going to be when you leave school?"

Willie dug his bare toes into the turf and shyly said, "A ploughman," but Geordie protested against this decision.

"Willie," he said earnestly, "I wouldn't. It's not much fun being a ploughman except when you find peesweeps' eggs in the furrows. Be a detective."

Willie might have retorted that detectives and ploughmen are not made out of the same bit of stuff, but he contented himself with murmuring in his soft Border voice, "I dinna ken," and was presently sent away by Mrs. Laidlaw

to get his dinner, the richer by two pennies.

Jim studied his brothers' attire, murmuring:

"Still to be neat, still to be drest . . ."

Rob rolled his head uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

"Aw, Jimmie, shut up," he said. "Isn't it nearly dinner-time?"

"Do you not see your father coming?" his mother asked, while Geordie, lying at her feet, said dreamily, "There was such a dear wee puddock in the hayfield, and Willie held it in his hand and said, 'Eh, sic a bonnie wee pawdie!' I wish I could speak like Willie; he makes such a nice sound."

Rob had taken off his shoes to empty hayseed out of them.

"We're going with him this afternoon," he announced, "to dig for treasure. We've forked enough for one day. It's hot work, and my hands are all blistered."

"Will digging for treasure be easier?" Eliza asked.

"Much," said Rob, while Jim asked where the operations were to begin.

"On the roundel—you know that round hillocky thing in the low field? There's an old king buried there with all his wives and crowns and things . . . we're taking spades—"

"It'll take a bit of digging," Jim said.

"I can see Father," cried Geordie, and they all turned to watch the figure that was coming down the glen towards them.

The farm lay in a fold of the hills far from anywhere, and when you opened the garden-gate you were on the heather; it was a paradise for the town-wearied. Every

morning when it was fine, Walter Laidlaw set off with a book in his pocket and stayed on the hills till dinnertime. Perhaps he did not read much, for there were a thousand things to take up his attention. The peace, made up of a myriad sounds—the whirring of insects in the midsummer heat, the bleating of the sheep, the cry of the whaup and the peesweeps, the voice of the burn—was such a joy that every few minutes he had to lift his eyes from his book to savour it; a hawk circling in the blue, the rabbits playing round their burrows, the whirr of a grouse as it rose from the heather, these were of greater interest than the printed page, which, after all could be read at any time. And, as he often reminded himself, winter was the best time for reading. Did not Charles Lamb say that the best books needed lamplight for their complete enjoyment?

When the rain came, equally contented, he would button on his mackintosh and set off for the river, generally accompanied by his two henchmen, Rob and Geordie, carrying (hopefully) a landing-net, and with their lunch safely stowed in a fishing-basket . . .

As his family watched him approach they were amused to see him stop every few minutes to take a long breath of the hill air scented with the new-cut meadow hay and thyme and heather.

"Father snuffs up the air like a bloodhound," Rob observed. Geordie ran to open the latch of the garden-gate, and came back holding his father's hand and looking up into his face. "And there was a wee puddock, Father—" they heard his voice running on as the two came down the walk.

It was a real farmhouse garden, chiefly useful, with its

rows of vegetables and gooseberry bushes, but not without beauty. The walls, Jim declared, were like the beds of a rocky torrent; the gravel was brought from Tweed and was of an ankle-breaking kind. There was a smooth sloping lawn with one big beech tree, and a herbaceous border down one side, which in this July month blazed with colour—a certain giant poppy of a peculiarly beautiful rose-red, which split herself in great clumps on the garden wall, being its chief ornament.

When Mr. Laidlaw looked at the flowers he smiled, and Eliza cried, "They bowed to you, Father. I distinctly saw them. It's only polite to greet flowers when you enter a garden."

Geordie looked at his sister earnestly. "They didn't really, did they? Bow, I mean?"

"Run, Rob, and tell Mrs. Scott we'll have dinner now, and we must all get our hands washed."

Mrs. Laidlaw lifted the book she had been reading and prepared to go into the house.

"I think," she said to her daughter, "that I won't read any more of this book you lent me. It was quite nice to start with, but I'm getting lost in the maze of talk—I wish people would write *real* books, not clever talk. There it is, Eliza. I think I'll stick to my own sort of book after this. You laugh at the authors I like, but anyway they set out to tell a story and they do it . . . Come away now, and don't let the soup get cold."

Mary-from-Skye had sailed away to her home for a holiday. The Laidlaws did not need her at Corhope, there being an old housekeeper, Mrs. Scott, and her husband installed there.

Mrs. Scott made wonderful broth, which the family now proceeded to enjoy.

"I was just hoping," said Mr. Laidlaw as he arranged his napkin on his knee, "that there would be broth today. It's delicious when the vegetables are at their freshest and best." He lifted a spoonful, quoting

" 'There's carrots intil't, and turnips intil't, and leeks intil't . . .' You remember, boys, when Queen Victoria asked the old body how she made her broth she replied, 'Weel, there's carrots intil't . .

" 'But what's " intil't" ?' asked the Queen.

" 'I'm tellin' ye. There's carrots intil't . . ."

The boys did remember, for they had been told the tale every summer; it belonged to Corhope as much as the rose-pink poppies, but there must have been a streak of politeness in their small boyish souls, for they listened with interest and grinned appreciation. Mrs. Laidlaw had a companion story of a farmer engaging a kitchen girl.

" 'What would you do,' he asked, if your kail was ower warm?'

" 'Wait till they cooled,' said two applicants, but that did not suit the farmer.

" 'Line ma mooth weel wi' pease-bannock an' sup awa',' said the third, and was engaged on the spot."

The talk drifted this way and that.

"If any one's going to Priorsford I'd like some wool," said Mrs. Laidlaw.

"I'm cycling in to get some typing paper," Jim told her, "but you must give me clear directions, remember, or I'll bring the wrong thing."

"Bring a picture paper," Eliza suggested. "Mother, I'll

drive you to have tea with Aunt Ailie, if you like. Fat old Missy gets no exercise."

"Don't forget," said Jim, "that she's to go to the station to meet old Ewan at 6 o'clock."

"Why, of course, Ewan Cameron's coming. I'd almost forgotten." Mrs. Laidlaw was shocked at herself. "But his room is ready. Poor Ewan!"

"Why 'poor'?" Eliza asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Ewan always seems pathetic to me somehow—so long and dreamy . . ."

"It's fine Ewan's coming," said Geordie. "He'll be glad about the kingfisher. Let me tell him, Rob."

Mrs. Laidlaw turned to her husband.

"And what are you going to do this afternoon, Walter?"

Walter Laidlaw looked out to the wide moorland. "I'll lift my eyes to the hills," he said.

CHAPTER 9

"Sing me the town they saw
Withouten fleck or flaw,
Aflame, more fine than glass
Of fair Abbayes, the boast,

. . . . .

While many knights and dames
With new and wondrous names. . .
Go singing down the street."

DIGBY MACKWORTH DOLBEN.

THE holidays were long past, November had come again, and Eliza was writing to Jim at Oxford.

There was no chewing of the pen, no defiling of the blotter with funny faces, no long intervals for reflection when it was to Jim the letter was going.

". . . You know what Glasgow is like in November," she wrote. "It has rained for four days in succession and we've hardly seen daylight. Nothing is happening—except meetings!—but the Neishes come back next week, and I shall be mighty glad to see them. Just to see Mary Neish gives me a different feeling about everything, about myself most of all. Half the time it doesn't seem to matter how one looks, life is like grey flannel—you know, stuffy; but there is something about the atmosphere of her house, something about Mary herself—the black crisp hair brushed back from her forehead, her little vivid face, the shadows under her greeny-brown eyes, her delicious clothes, the long swift steps she takes—that makes me feel thrilled about life, myself, everything. And she is so interested in people that she makes them interesting whether they are or not. I

used to think Glasgow was just a great welter of houses, where most people lived in tenements and did grimy things for their living, and a certain number lived in drives and crescents and terraces, varying from comfortable to sumptuous, but now I see there are numberless Glasgows, and I think it is Mary Neish's ambition to know them all. Mother complains that I keep on talking about 'interesting' people as if they only existed in certain select parts of the city, and says that our church-people are the most interesting people she knows. I daresay they are, in a way, but it's not the sort of interestingness that I like. Father laughs at me and calls me a snob, and a lover of the 'tuppence-coloured' in life, and advises me to cultivate a sense of humour, but I doubt if too acute a sense of humour is desirable in a minister's daughter. Last night, at the Band of Hope, I was almost overcome.

"John Duncan is taking temporary charge while the rightful president is ill, and he was a pathetic sight trying, with no success, to cope with these imps. The hall was so crowded that the walls perspired, and the atmosphere was such that you recoiled on entering. Poor John Duncan tried to open the proceedings with a little good advice, but his gentle, ineffectual voice was drowned in the tumult, so we went on with the programme.

"I do think they ought to make the children repeat beforehand the words of their songs. A small girl got up and blithely sang a most ribald ballad relating how a certain young woman had mislaid her love at the Fair, but confidently expected to get 'anither gin Ne'er Day'! Another sang something about 'Wha wad mairry an aul' man'; then Mr. Crockett—you know the very short broad

man with a beard who sits in the side near us?—got up to give an address.

"He began well, Now, boys and girls, d'you want to grow up drunkards?'

"There was a unanimous shout of 'No.'

"The second attempt was not so successful.

" 'Boys and girls, d'you want to grow up topers?'

"The second yell was quite as unanimous—'Yes.' At this Mr. Crockett was rather nonplussed, but he bethought himself. 'Ye mean ye want to be abstainers? That's right. Never touch anything stronger than milk. I'll tell ye a story about a man called a Bedouin who fed his wife on milk till she got that fat she could hardly walk.'

"The children received this with shouts of laughter, and the absurdity of the thing seemed also to impress the speaker, for he went on: 'Of course, it's all right to be kind to your wife, but to feed her on milk till she canna walk is fair ridiculous . . .'

"His audience, seeing no immediate end to this tale, rapidly grew restive, and I was trying to hold apart two boys who had begun to beat each other on the head, when the door opened and Father came in. The look of relief on Mr. Crockett's face! The yell of welcome from the children! And, when he began to speak, the blessed calm!

"I believe I've discovered the secret of Father's interest in his work. It's just that he doesn't see things as they are, but as he hopes they will be. It wasn't a crowd of little dirty children he saw last night, it was the young lives that are going to grow up and make all things new. A Band of Hope indeed! There is simply no end to what Father hopes for those children, and for the city of Glasgow.

"You know that little book of poems you gave me with the lovely:

'Sing me the town they saw
Withouten fleck or flaw . . .' "

"Eliza," said Mrs. Laidlaw, trotting briskly into the room, "aren't you going to change your dress? You look so dingy—"

"Oh," said Eliza, "what's the use of changing? I've to go to the sewing-class to-night anyway; and it's a beastly day."

"Nonsense, child. If it's dreary outside, all the more reason for us to be as bright as possible indoors."

"Oh well—" Eliza put her letter in the blotter and rose with the air of humouring a thoroughly unreasonable person. "I suppose I must stagger upstairs and change, if you make such a point of it."

"That's better," Mrs. Laidlaw said ten minutes later, looking approvingly at a trim daughter. "And I hope you left your room tidy? I do dislike untidy ways in a girl."

"Not in a man?"

"Oh, one can't expect much from a man in the way of tidiness. It seems to be their instinct to throw things on the floor, poor souls; but an untidy woman revolts me . . . Did you meet any one when you were in town this morning?"

"Did I?" Eliza considered. "Yes—Meta West. She was in great form. She's got an invitation to spend a month in London with the rich uncle they so often talk about."

Mrs. Laidlaw nodded. "He's a knight," she said.

"Oh yes. Meta rather rolled Sir Alfred round her tongue. I'd do it too, I daresay, if I were blessed with a knighted uncle. He lives in Princes' Gate with his lady-wife, and

Meta expects to have a very good time. She was telling me about her clothes. I wish I had some of them."

"Yes," her mother said, sewing placidly, "but I don't suppose you would change with Meta to get them. She has lots of money, but she has no brothers—"

"Oh, I know. For that matter I don't want to change with any one. I'd rather be myself, such as I am. But I do wish you would let me try and make our house look nicer. The drawing-room— You know Mrs. Neish's room, how different it is."

"It's different, certainly, but to my mind it isn't half as nice. I could hardly find a place to sit down; and such bare stretches of wall! Our walls are so well covered, and there are so many things to look at everywhere, I never see a room I like so much . . . But still, if you want to make it artistic I suppose I must let you try."

Eliza laughed and took up a book, and her mother sewed, and pondered on the problem of a daughter. Boys were comparatively easy—bad, noisy, untidy, but you knew where you were with them; but girls were queer, unsettled creatures, full of whims and fancies. Not all girls, of course. Mrs. Stit's girls had asked nothing better than to work in their father's church, had evinced no desire to change their mother's drawing-room, and had married succeeding assistants with a beautiful regularity. But they had been dull girls, conventional, somewhat insipid, with none of Eliza's—what was it that Eliza had the Stit girls lacked? Mrs. Laidlaw wrinkled her brows in thought. Charm? Temperament? Something, anyway, that made people aware of her, that made what she said matter. It was odd, Mrs. Laidlaw reflected, how some people spoke deep truths

and made them sound like commonplaces, while from others mere nonsense seemed to gain a meaning . . . Her husband liked to talk nonsense—he got that from his mother. She remembered well the fragile, pretty woman who had died long ago, when Jimmie was a baby. She had been the kindest of mothers-in-law, but terribly given to laughing at nothing, and daft about poetry. At her door Mrs. Laidlaw laid Jim's desire to be a playwright and Eliza's passion for books, also her husband's lack of worldly wisdom and his carelessness about money matters.

She knew how deeply her husband had loved his mother and she tried loyally to revere her memory, but in her heart she sometimes wondered how it happened that such a light-hearted woman, who even when ill and dying had liked to laugh, and had enjoyed pretty things about her, should have a saint for a son. For a saint her Walter was; not perhaps a conventional saint, but the real thing for all that, and, unlike most saints, easy to live with . . . Who was to blame, she asked herself, that their children were not more interested in Christian work? Was it true what Eliza said, that they heard too much about it—saw, perhaps, something of the seamy side of a minister's life? They certainly knew about the small frictions and discussions that inevitably arise even in the best regulated congregations, but so far as their father was concerned there was no "seamy" side. She bristled at the very idea . . . Yet Jim would not hear of the Church, and it wasn't likely that a minister would be found in Rob or Geordie! Was her dream of visiting manses never to come true? She was letting them go, her dreams, one by one. How often she had seen herself as Moderator's Lady, sitting in the gallery

behind Walter in his knee-breeches and lace ruffles, receiving with a gracious smile choice bouquets! She had planned all she would wear, nothing conspicuous, but everything of the best; a soft grey dress and a hat with feathers, a black satin coat lined with grey *crêpe de Chine*, grey gloves, and—she could never quite make up her mind if grey shoes and stockings would not be too dashing, it might perhaps be better to have black stockings and patent-leather shoes with buckles. For the receptions she would have black velvet. Always she had pined for a real velvet dress. Once she had got a velveteen one, and one of the babies, Geordie, she thought, had been sick down the front. Well, she knew now that she would never be a Moderator's Lady, but she still hoped to help to furnish a manse, to go to the induction soirée and hear the people whisper, "It's the minister's mother!" . . . Mrs. Stit had three manses to visit . . . Walter said Eliza was not content. Mrs. Laidlaw moved impatiently in her chair. What was this talk of discontent? If a girl couldn't be happy in a good home! Jim spoiled her. She suspected he had put her up to change the drawing-room, the room she had been so proud of and which was still perfect in her eyes. But perhaps a grown-up daughter should be allowed some say. The room hadn't been papered since they came to the house, and she had been saving up for a new carpet . . . She was happily planning just how everything would be done, and picturing herself introducing an astonished Mrs. Stit to a wonderful new room, when she was brought back to the present by the triumphant shout of Geordie as, returning from school, he reached the front door first and dashed it shut in his brother's face.

Mrs. Learmond came in after tea and sat in the study in the big leather chair that was beginning to get very worn and shabby after having for twenty years been crawled over and licked by babies, turned upside-down to make a boat for bigger children, jumped on and battered by schoolboys, but was still most comfortable. Everybody liked to see her there. Geordie lay at her feet on the rug reading some low paper-boarded book with a picture in front of an Englishwoman struggling single-handed with a horde of savages. It was evidently as exciting as it looked, for, as he read, Geordie gave convulsive leaps like a dog in a dream, and murmured once in awe-struck tones, "By Gum!"

Mrs. Learmond's cheerful, high-coloured face beamed with pleasure as she sat watching him, turned half round to listen to Walter Laidlaw piping gaily in the background like some middle-aged clerical Strephon (for, like R.L.S., he was a great performer before the Lord on the penny whistle), and at the same time trying to pay attention to what her hostess was saying as she fumbled in the work-basket for wool to mend a large hole in one of Rob's stockings. She appealed to Eliza.

"Look for the blue ball, won't you? I think it rolled under your chair. Thank you . . . I was only asking, Mrs. Learmond, if you had enjoyed Mrs. Hartree's party yesterday. I was so disappointed I couldn't be there. Was it nice?"

"Oh, quite. I don't care greatly for tea-parties. I think I'm too old for the clatter of them, and I got planted beside a woman who gave me the whole history of an illness she had had, sparing me no details. I longed to say to her, 'My

good woman, no one on earth except our very nearest and dearest (if we're lucky enough to have any) cares in the very least what we feel, and the sooner we all realize it the better.' Mrs. Hartree herself is always an interesting woman to talk to. She strikes me as rather selfish, intent on giving herself all the enjoyment she can, and she has the wit to appreciate the good things of life, books and music and travel, and the money to enjoy them."

"Ye-es." Mrs. Laidlaw agreed rather doubtfully. "As you say, she likes to live softly and give herself a good time, but she isn't really selfish. She has never hinted at it, but I know how good she is to women living in rooms, working for their living, she puts herself out to give them a good time; and I have known her take the journey to London in order to meet a missionary on sick leave, bring her home with her, and give her a splendid rest and every care till she was strong again."

Mrs. Learmond nodded. "It shows one the folly of trying to label any one in this world . . . I know that tune well, Mr. Laidlaw," and she hummed:

"The craw's killed the pussie—O,
The craw's killed the pussie—O,
The wee bit kitlin' sat and grat
In Jeannie's wee bit hoosie—O."

"Do crows really kill cats?" Rob asked. " How rotten!"

Geordie rolled to his feet, stuffing into a pocket the lurid tale he had been reading, and said fiercely, " If I caught one doing it I'd shoot it . . . Father, I've a map to draw."

"You'd better begin then, my son."

"He can't draw maps," said Rob. "You'd think his coast-

line was done with a fret-saw, and he makes the mountain ranges like hairy-oobits."

Mr. Laidlaw laid aside his whistle. "Well, I must be off. Good-night, Mrs. Learmond; we'll be seeing you soon again, I hope."

The boys went to their work, Eliza to her meeting, while the two ladies sat on together by the fire. Mrs. Learmond had donned her huge round spectacles and was darning Geordie's stockings.

Mrs. Laidlaw protested that visitors did not as a rule darn, but Mrs. Learmond said, "Don't grudge me the pleasure. You don't know what those two funny laddies mean to me. When you are as old as I am you will know how to value youth."

"Yes—perhaps; but to middle age youth is puzzling."

Mrs. Learmond drew the needle and thread in and out of a large hole and presently said, "I sometimes think middle age is the saddest, most difficult time. You see the foolishness of youth, but have forgotten the rapture. You see the pathos of age without realizing its compensations—and they are many."

Mrs. Laidlaw sighed. " t's no easy thing to bring up a family, and one girl is worse than half a dozen boys. I've always been sorry about Eliza spending so much time poring over poetry, and I've tried hard to make her practical, and perhaps I do nag a little—Jim sometimes calls me the little gadfly—but now she has begun to try to improve us all, not to speak of the house! Her father just laughs—you know his way—but it makes dispeace with the boys, and it makes me quite nervous when I'm speaking to people to see Eliza blushing for me."

Mrs. Learmond laughed. "Poor child, she's at the reforming stage. Children are often terribly affronted by their parents. I remember Sir Walter Barnett, the scientist, coming to tea with us one day at Gowrie, with his schoolgirl daughter, driving in a pony-cart. He told me the child had almost wept with mortification because he had waved his hand to some of the people as they drove through their own village and cried, 'We're going for a drive.' She was afraid they might think her father peculiar! I remember, too, when I was about eighteen, going out to dinner alone with my father, who seized the opportunity to sneeze eight times running at table, and I thought I could never lift my head again! Girls are geese!"

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head now as she laughed.

"It seems to me," she said, "that the modern young girl is rather an unpleasing creature. I shouldn't have dreamt of condescending to my parents as girls do now. Respect doesn't seem to exist any longer. And they behave, those girls, as if they were something rare and precious and greatly to be admired. I want to say to them, 'What do you think you are? Pretty young girls are as common as dandelions; you have done nothing, you are utterly untried, why should you condescend to any one?' . . . And the ugliest thing about them is their attitude to age. I'd send them all to China to learn ancestor worship."

"This is eloquence," said Mrs. Learmond, stopping in her task to stare at her friend.

"And with it all Eliza's a darling," Mrs. Laidlaw continued. "I don't believe I want her changed in the least—but she's very unlike the Stit girls."

"Thank God for that!" said Mrs. Learmond.

"She wants to do up the drawing-room."

"Be thankful it's nothing worse! There's no end to what one wants to do at nineteen! Ah, my dear, be glad of your girl and don't vex yourself about trifles. I'm looking back a long, long way, the length of eighty years, and I see youth, not only as very sweet, but very pitiful . . ."

CHAPTER 10

"What's in a name?"
Romeo and Juliet.

ELIZA got her way, and Mrs. Laidlaw's drawing-room suffered a change which the owner acquiesced in but did not pretend to admire. She looked with a patient sigh at the bare walls and the self-coloured carpet, and, unnoticed, shook her head sadly at her husband.

And now Jim was coming home, and Eliza anxiously awaited his verdict. She was pathetically anxious that he should have everything that he was accustomed to at Oxford, and begged her mother to have evening dinner—"Just for this one night, until he gets broken into our ways again—" but Mrs. Laidlaw on this point was adamant.

"Perfect nonsense," she said. "Surely Jim knows by this time what his home is like, and that we have only one servant, and that late dinner doesn't suit us at all. Mary's a good creature, but she resents extra work in the evening—you can't wonder when she's been hard at it all day. And your father has to go out early, and you know how he hates to miss a meal with us all together. No, no, we'll just take our tea at the usual hour and give Jim supper when he arrives. I've every sympathy with you wanting to have things nice, but the line must be drawn somewhere, and I draw it at late dinner."

Eliza said no more, but she remembered ruefully Jim's description of arriving at the Meades', then she comforted

herself with the reflection that if some of Jim's friends had beautiful homes, others had decidedly the reverse. There was Ewan Cameron. Quite lately she had been at his home in Dennistoun, and had been struck by its unattractive appearance. The Camerons had left their house in Ross-shire for Glasgow five years ago, but they still seemed bewildered in the city's bustle, and, Eliza felt, would have been infinitely better back at their loch-side. Neil Cameron was a beautiful preacher, but a dreamer, and in practical matters his wife was little use to him. She was a gentle creature who could sing like a bird the songs of the Hebrides, but she was a poor housekeeper, energetic in spasms, but lacking in method. She had shown Eliza over their flat, and the girl had been amazed to see that she seemed pleased with it. She pointed out cheerfully that Ewan had a gas-fire in his bedroom and worked there, as the study proper was nearly always in use for other purposes. Eliza looked at the narrow slip of a room with its strips of bare carpet, the dingy cover on the bed, the washstand converted into a writing-table with a shelf of books above it. Poor Ewan coming home to that! And she hugged herself as she thought of the surprise she had for Jim.

The room at Blinkbonny that had been the nursery was seldom used now, and Mrs. Laidlaw had remarked one day that it would make a good study for Jim, and later on, for Rob and Geordie, when these two worthies should condescend to take the pursuit of knowledge seriously.

Eliza sprang at the idea and held her mother to it. It was a sunny room looking out on the garden, easy to make pleasant with pale yellow walls and paint. A joiner made

two shelves to stand on the ugly mantelpiece, and these held poetry-books and various trifles from Eliza's own room. A many-coloured Indian rug lay on the old nursery cork-carpet, and the much-hacked and kicked table had been freshly stained, and now stood ready with ink-stand and blotter to serve Jim as a writing-desk. Mr. Laidlaw had contributed an armchair, and there were two nursery chairs with new cushions over their hard wooden seats.

Eliza always longed intensely for Jim's coming, but when he came she was conscious of a vague disappointment. She seemed so near him when he was away, and so oddly at a distance when he was actually there. His tales of people she did not know, his description of things, of a dinner here or a dance there, seemed somehow to make a stranger of him. She wondered as she listened to him if Ewan Cameron went back to his dreary home in Dennistoun and stood with his heels on the fender and talked to his "people" of the good time he had at Oxford. Probably not, for Ewan had not Jim's way of making friends, his aptitude for social life. He plodded along quietly. Jim worked too, of course, but things came wonderfully easily to him. It had always been so. But Jim said Ewan was going to do great things.

Jim was speaking, "You must come up to Oxford next year, Mother, you and 'Liza. I'll take rooms for you at the Mitre. I'll have rooms in the High then, and I'll give a dinner for you. 'Liza would adore the O.U.D.S.—what about it?"

Eliza raised rapturous eyes, but her mother only said, "That would take a lot of thinking about . . . Are you finished, Jim? I'll ring for Mary to clear away—I promised her she would go out to-night for a little.—Well, Eliza,

you must show Jim the improvements." She turned to do something to the fire so that the brother and sister might go alone to the room that was to be a surprise.

Jim would have rushed his sister upstairs to the drawing-room, but Eliza hung back, saying half-shyly, "In here first, Jim," and opened the old nursery door.

A reading-lamp stood lit on the table beside the clean blotter and large ink-bottle, and a bright fire sent dancing lights over the yellow walls and the newly-varnished furniture; it looked an enviable little study for any man.

Rather breathless, Eliza looked at her brother, and was satisfied when she saw the pleased smile on his face.

"By Jove," he said, " what a jolly little den! When did you get this done?"

"It's for you—a place of your own to work in and have your friends. Father let me have the armchair, and Mother gave me the rug, and Rob and Geordie spent a whole Saturday varnishing that old cupboard—doesn't it look nice?"

"Good old 'Liza! It'll be a tremendous help to have a place like this."

Jim was studying the possibilities of the room. "I'll put the typewriter and the books I'm using along here, and pile the others in the cupboard. And I've all sorts of things to put on these shelves. Come and help me unpack and we'll get it all done to-night. It *was* a good idea, old 'Liza."

Eliza's cup for the moment was full, but all she said was–

"All right, but come and see the drawing-room first."

"Of course. I forgot—a most exciting house, this!" and laughing, hand in hand, they ran upstairs together.

"It looks much nicer with a fire," Eliza explained, her

hand on the door-handle, "but you can see . . ."

How often she had lived through this moment; how often she had gone upstairs and flung open the door to surprise herself and try and imagine how it would strike Jim.

Certainly the room was greatly changed. Mrs. Neish had given valuable assistance and the result was surprisingly good. The carpet was blue, a colour regarded with deep suspicion by Mrs. Laidlaw, who liked to recall what a shopman had said to her on her one and only visit to London about a blue carpet: "A fugitive shade, madam." The curtains also were powder blue, and the rather ugly furniture had loose covers of the same material. Some old chintz that had lived a safe and secluded life in a cupboard had been brought out and shone bravely in blue and rose and gold. A mirror from Mrs. Laidlaw's old home, which had been put in a bedroom because its gilt was tarnished, had been rescued by Mrs. Neish and hung over the fireplace. The same lady had given as her gift to the room two framed panels of Chinese embroidery, which were the joy of Eliza, who adored colour.

Most of the photographs had been put neatly into a lacquer box which stood under the writing-table, and those whom their owner wished particularly to remain in the open were arranged on a table in a corner of the window.

It would be idle to pretend that Mrs. Laidlaw was pleased with her altered drawing-room. She had followed Eliza and Jim upstairs, and stood looking discontentedly at the new carpet.

"Everything shows on it," she complained. "Every tick of white thread, every crumb. And the *oos*—Mary has

brushed panful after panful off it; it seems to me the whole carpet's coming off."

"New carpets always do that," Eliza told her.

"Oh, but not like this—panfuls of oos."

"Where did you get that word, Mother—*oos*?" Jim asked. "I'm sure no dictionary knows it."

"It's a very good word; it means—just oos, fluffy stuff. Eliza had a craze as a child for eating it. She picked all the blankets bare and the fur off her coat, and we had to put her hands into gloves without fingers—they used to be called."

Eliza hated above everything to have the faults of her early youth recalled, more especially before Rob and Geordie, who had followed their elders to the drawing-room and hailed the story with *pawkies* ribald laughter.

"Ho! Elijah ate her coat, poor hungry Elijah!" said Geordie, while Rob began to chant a ballad about "Elijah on the battlefield."

The girl turned to her mother accusingly. "Why did you give me such a hideous name, Mother?"

"Why, it's a beautiful name—my own mother's name."

"I can't help that, it's a name that simply asks to be made fun of. I'm not going to have it any more, I'm going to be Lisa after this."

"After the Monna Lisa?" asked Jim. "Lisa Laidlaw sounds rather well."

"But it's not her name," said Rob and Geordie together. "She's Eliza—Eliza—"

Mrs. Laidlaw regarded her daughter. "You'll always be Eliza to me!" she said, "but of course I know it's an old-fashioned name. You'll get rid of everything in time—grace

before meals, your name, your mother's furniture, and, in time, your mother too."

A concerted howl from the family greeted this remark, and Walter Laidlaw, entering at that moment, asked what the noise was about.

His wife explained. "Eliza is ashamed of her name and—"

"And Mother seized the opportunity to harrow our feelings," Jim interrupted, putting an arm round his mother, who sighed deeply, though the corners of her mouth were determined to turn up.

Mr. Laidlaw lifted his eyebrows at his daughter. "Eliza's a good name," he said.

"Oh, Father, it's *not*, at least not for me. It was all right for Robert Murray M'Cheyne's sister, and people in memoirs, but I'm going to be Lisa."

"Dear me! Won't you be Lisa for best and Eliza for common?"

"Father's laughing at you, Elijah," Geordie said.

Mr. Laidlaw looked round the room with a pleasant smile. He had been perfectly satisfied with it before, photographs, ornaments, and all, but he was delighted to praise its transformation. If it made Eliza happier to banish the things that he and Ailie had begun house with, what could they do but submit? He rather liked the pleasant bareness and added space. And Ailie, he suspected, though she grumbled, was not averse to having a room a little different from her neighbours'. He had overheard her say to Mrs. Stit one day, with something of the pride that apes humility, "Of course, I have no pretensions to taste myself, but it's wonderful how you begin to like good things when you live with them, though," here she sighed, "I always

will like bright new rugs better than old faded things though they may not be so valuable."

Mrs. Laidlaw now stood up.

"I can't think why we are all sitting here in the cold when there are good fires downstairs." She stooped to pick up a speck of white from the carpet. "I'm glad Jim is pleased with both rooms. I hardly seem to know the house now, and this blue carpet will give me no peace."

Jim laughed as he put his arm round his mother.

"Poor little Mother, seeing all her household gods reft from her! Cheer up! As a matter of fact, Victorian things are coming back into fashion. There's quite a rage for china dogs."

Mrs. Laidlaw, going downstairs with one hand on the mahogany rail and one on her boy's shoulder, said, "Ah, but they are far enough away to be interesting. When your father and I were married in 1893 things were at their ugliest. So Eliza says when she looks at the photographs of the wedding—great sleeves and umbrella skirts. I thought them very fine. Such yards and yards of material used, though the dresses weren't nearly as expensive as they are now; and our hair was all puffed out and our hats standing well off our heads. Women looked like women then; now you've sometimes to look twice to know if it's a boy or a girl. I wonder if your father would like coffee to-night instead of hot milk? Run and ask him, Jim, and see that the boys go straight to bed, it's long past their time."

That was the beginning of a delightful vacation. So many pleasant things happened to Eliza. She and Jim had a week together at Corhope and enjoyed to the full the winter landscape, the warm byres full of munching cattle, the

rough comfort of the old farmhouse.

Jim was working hard both at his college work and his writing, and Eliza spent every spare minute in the little study, curled up beside him in the armchair with a book. Quiet as a mouse she sat, but when, gravelled for lack of matter, Jim rose and, lighting a pipe, stood with his heels on the fender, she was all eagerness to talk or listen.

Sometimes Ewan Cameron would come over from Dennistoun, and Eliza would make coffee and insist on Ewan having the only comfortable chair while she sat on the rug, and Mr. Laidlaw, home from his evening visiting, would perch himself on the edge of the table and listen to the talk while he enjoyed a cup of Eliza's coffee.

Generally they talked of books, of characters who seemed more alive to them than the people they met daily, men and women who never lived on earth and yet must live eternally; and often they talked of themselves and what they meant to do, at least Eliza and Jim did. Ewan smoked and said little, while Mr. Laidlaw listened and smiled.

There seemed no end to what the brother and sister had to say to each other. Sometimes, when there were visitors, Mrs. Laidlaw felt justly indignant to find that she was left with the whole business of entertaining, while Eliza and Jim, heedless of the strangers, sat together in earnest conversation.

One evening just before term began they were together in the little study. Jim had been writing for a couple of hours, and now he laid down his pen and gathered up the sheets with a sigh of relief.

"Finished?" Eliza asked.

"Thank goodness, yes. I was hopelessly bogged with it this afternoon, but I think it has worked out fairly well I'll type it to-morrow."

"Wouldn't it save time if you typed it right away?"

"It would, but I can't do it. Words are so dead when you type them—to me at least. Funny, isn't it, that I should be able to make people live for myself with a fountain pen and not with a typewriter. 'Base mechanic happenings,' that's it!" He took a spill from a dish and leant down to the fire to light his pipe, and then, in his favourite attitude, his heels on the fender and his back propped against the mantelshelf, he smoked for a few minutes in silence, his eyes narrowed, thinking.

Presently he said, "I believe I've got a jolly good idea for a story."

Eliza sat up. " A magazine story?"

"No, a full-length novel, no less. I'm getting sick of these snippety tales, although they pay quite well. A book must be so jolly interesting, something you can put anything into, all you think and feel and hope and believe—and all the quotations you like best—"

"I wonder if that makes a good book," Eliza said doubtfully. "I mean to say some quite dull books read like that—as if the author had simply thrown everything in, a sort of stock-pot of a book . . . But didn't you ever finish your play? You never speak about it."

"I wrote a play of sorts, and Basil Barclay read it and was very decent about it, but I could see for myself that it was no bally good, so I burned it. I've started another. The first two acts aren't too bad, but I can't get the third . . . I'm giving it a rest just now, and if I go back to it fresh from

doing quite different things, I may get an inspiration. By Jove, 'Liza, life's interesting—but so dashed short."

"Short? There seems to be a dreadful lot of it!"

"That's because you haven't really taken hold yet. Once you do you whirl along like a dancing dervish . . . There's simply no end to the things I want to do." He puffed at his pipe vigorously for a minute, then said, "I wonder what Rob and Geordie will be? They'll have to begin soon and work if they mean to get scholarships. Father can't be expected to send them to college . . . The Army's the place for Rob, but I doubt if we could manage it. He might have a shot at the I.C.S. Geordie's clever, if he weren't such an idle varlet. How old is he? Twelve? Oh, he's time to take himself up yet."

"Father always says that. He is so funny about the boys. No matter how badly they behave, all he says is, 'Let them alone, they'll be all right yet.' Jimmie, isn't Father *innocent?"*

Walter Laidlaw, with his sixty years' experience of a tough world, would have smiled to hear his young daughter, but Jim did not smile.

"I know," he said with all seriousness, and then, "Father's such a sahib. When I see some other men's fathers I can tell you I'm thankful for him—you know the soft, fat pompous men with big cigars, whose one thought is money, whose god is their belly—"

"Why are riches often so ugly?" Eliza wondered.

"They needn't be . . . I'm hoping to be rich myself some day without being offensive . . . We'll have fine times then, 'Liza . . ."

"Yes, but I wish you'd call me Lisa."

"Oh, all right . . . You and Mother must come to Oxford."

"It's the place I want to see most on earth." She sighed. "The days fly so vindictively fast, Jimmie, when you are at home, and drag so when you are away. I wish I knew how to take hold, as you talk about . . . Well, something's surely bound to happen soon . . ."

CHAPTER 11

"In sickness, the soul begins to dress herself for Immortality."
JEREMY TAYLOR.

IT really began before Jim left, at least the first mutterings of the storm might have been heard on the Sunday before his departure.

They were all in the vestry between services, drinking cocoa and eating sandwiches as was their custom. Rob and Geordie sprawled on the sofa; Mr. Laidlaw in his silk cassock sat sideways with his legs crossed sipping beef-tea, which he preferred to cocoa; his wife was crumbling a sandwich on her plate; Jim and Eliza sat together on the opposite side of the table.

"Yes, but Jimmie," Mrs. Laidlaw was insisting, "even though you do give in other ways, you ought to give to the Central Fund and Foreign Missions in your father's church. Remember a tenth is required of you. It's so easy to say loosely, 'Oh, I'm sure I give far more than a tenth.' When you really count up you find how far you fall short. Here are you with talents and strength to use them and . . ."

"Oh, very well, Mother," Jim said, getting up from the table and standing with one knee on his chair, looking at his mother with a half-amused, half-rueful look, "but what a huckstering God yours is! You talk as if you could square the Almighty with a fiver."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked at her son and quite suddenly burst into tears.

It was an unprecedented occurrence. Her family knew

her in many moods and rather enjoyed them all, but never had they seen her give way like this. An awed hush fell on the room. The boys, not quite sure whether they were to blame or not, sat quite still, Eliza looked rather frightened, while Jim got very red and ashamed.

No one spoke till Walter Laidlaw said in a detached voice, "It is amazing how beef-tea keeps its heat."

Then, as suddenly as she had cried, his wife began to laugh, and presently they were all laughing, and Mrs. Laidlaw, mopping her eyes, said she didn't know what had made her behave so foolishly, and Jim apologized handsomely for having hurt her feelings, and all was well.

But if Walter Laidlaw had not been too busy and Eliza too young and self-absorbed, they would have noticed that Mrs. Laidlaw was not quite herself. She was sleeping badly and saying nothing about it, work was a burden, and the effort every week to find something to say to her class more than could be borne. She was appalled at her own lethargy when she found herself looking longingly at her bed in the daytime. Instead of starting in the morning like a small tornado and rushing briskly through the day's work, she had an absurd inclination to lie still and cry. She felt herself being irritable and unreasonable, and she hated to look in the glass and see a grey face and lifeless-looking hair, she who had been so well coloured and fresh. She supposed that it was simply old age creeping on, and that every year life would become more and more of a burden until she went to her long home. She murmured to herself as she tried to bustle about as usual, "All the daughters of musick are brought low," and then laughed a little at herself, remembering that she hardly knew one note from another.

One day she felt so far from well that she almost made up her mind to send for the doctor, but decided that it was a pity to bother, she would go on till she dropped. They would be sorry, doubtless, when it was too late. She cried a little at the thought. They would be so lost without her—her poor Walter, who didn't even know where his underclothes stayed and couldn't remember an engagement unless she was there to jog his memory, and Rob and Geordie, and Eliza with her head so full of whimsies, and Jim . . . what would they all do? The congregation, too, would miss her. Who would preach the funeral sermon? Not Mr. Stit, she hoped. He would be sure to take as his text *She hath done what she could*, and she didn't want to be patronized by Mr. Stit. He would do it very well, she knew that. She could hear the effective break in his voice as he spoke of "the busy feet stilled." . . . Would there be black on the pulpit and on the manse pew? How desolate they would look, Walter and the children, and she wouldn't be there to comfort them, and she doubted if Eliza had much idea of comfort, but Mary would see that they had a good hot meal when they came home from the service. And where would she be? In Heaven, she hoped, rather bleakly . . . But, anyway, she would have Tom, and at the thought of the boy who had left her she dropped her head on the arm of the chair and wept bitterly. He had not been a story-book child, he had said no pretty comforting things to his mother in his short illness, he had had no desire to sing among the angels. His last conscious words had been a demand that Rob and Geordie should not be allowed to play with his new toys until he could play too; and his mother, with that odd bitterness against the living

which sometimes comes to us when one we love much is taken, sent the toys to the Sick Children's Hospital . . . Would Tom know her again? she wondered. Had he grown to heavenly stature now, or was he still the same little snub-nosed boy with the impish light in his eyes? He had been so unlike heavenly mansions, her wayward little son; she could not picture him happy in a white robe singing among gates of pearl and chalcedony, but when she had said that to Walter he had reminded her that there were boys and girls playing in the streets . . .

She was tear-stained when the family gathered for tea, but no one remarked on it, for since Tom's going she often cried when alone.

It was a bitterly cold January, and the whole household went down with the prevailing influenza. Walter Laidlaw was the worst, and was quite sharply ill, while Rob and Geordie rolled about in bed like two porpoises, much enjoying beef-tea and oranges. Eliza was felled with a headache for two days, and even Mary-from-Skye succumbed. Mrs. Laidlaw had of necessity to keep her feet, and toiled up and down the long stairs with poultices and hot drinks and comic papers, while a charwoman in the kitchen attacked the work every morning and was badly routed before evening. Eliza, realizing that to her mother fell the task of keeping everything going, struggled to her feet as soon as she could. It was a thick fog the morning she crawled downstairs, and so cold that she shivered inside the thick knitted coat she had wrapped herself in. The fire in the dining-room had been lit and burned feebly, a brush and dust-pan lay before it, and Eliza began to brush listlessly, feeling her back weak and her feet very heavy.

Her mother came in and found her sweeping.

"Oh, Eliza, poor child, you shouldn't have got up . . . Mrs. Campbell hasn't come this morning. She said she didn't feel well last night. Mary got up, but was so giddy she had to go back to bed . . . D'you think you could manage to take up the boys' breakfasts?"

"Oh yes. What do they have?"

"Toast—a good deal, and there's some boiled ham in the pantry, and I've been giving them each an orange. They're hungry now, poor lambs!"

Eliza went off to cut bread and make toast; that done she sought the boiled ham in the pantry, and then became aware of an ominous dripping.

"Mother," she said a few minutes later, "a pipe's burst somewhere, and it's dripping down into the pantry and somebody's spilt ammoniated quinine over the boiled ham."

Mrs. Laidlaw sank down, despair in her face. "What is to be done? There's no one fit to go for a plumber. I must go myself."

"Indeed you won't, Mother. I'll go in next door and ask them to telephone. I'll put something right over my head and shan't be a bit the worse."

"It's just enough to kill you," her mother said resignedly. "I'll go and poach eggs for the boys . . . I wonder who was in the pantry with ammoniated quinine?"

When everybody was up once more the doctor said Geordie's tonsils must come out. Mrs. Laidlaw felt this was really the last straw, but she said nothing. Eliza, on the other hand, said a lot. It worried her dreadfully, the thought of this small operation.

Geordie, on being told what the doctor said, flatly refused to have anything belonging to him removed. In vain Eliza pleaded with him. She felt if only he would say he was willing she could not feel so like a traitor and a murderer, for all arrangements had been made, Jim's room was being put right for the operation, and the doctor was coming the next morning. But with all her coaxing Geordie would not budge an inch.

He was to have no breakfast the morning of the operation, and Eliza sat with him to distract his attention. He did not seem to notice the omission, and crawled happily about the bed pretending he was stalking big game, while his sister listened for any sound from outside. When her father came in she turned a white wretched face to him and said, "I wish I could cut this day out of the calendar, jump over it, miss it out!"

"But to some, 'Liza, it may be the happiest day of their lives, and they'll grudge every minute passing. What are you reading to him?"

Eliza held out the book for her father's inspection.

"*Dream Days.* He likes the one about the circus best. 'What time is it now? Oh, there's the bell."

Her mother came into the room, and Eliza, looking over the banisters, saw Mary admitting two men in overcoats, carrying bags. They were coming upstairs . . . Her mother was speaking to them. In a minute she came leading Geordie in his dressing-gown, his face all excitement . . .

Eliza rushed into the drawing-room, locked the door, piled all the cushions on the sofa, burrowed her head well under them, and with her fingers in her ears lay there, praying fervently, as she had never prayed before, "Oh,

God, don't let them hurt him, please don't let them hurt him."

Fully an hour later when she ventured forth all was quiet. She stood on the landing holding her breath, listening. Could anything have gone wrong? Had Geordie not come out of the anaesthetic? She gripped the banister, suddenly sick . . . Then she heard Geordie's voice, high, querulous, quite unlike his usual voice, ask for something, and she went in.

"It was mean," he was saying, "*you* might have told me, 'Liza," and she fell on her knees by the bed and hugged his feet under the blankets.

"It doesn't matter now it's over," she said.

"It *does* matter," Geordie insisted.

"He was very brave," his mother said, sitting white and shaken by the fire.

"Wait," said Eliza, and flew to her room. She had bought with all that remained of her allowance an air-gun, which she knew Geordie's heart had yearned after for long.

"There," she said, returning and handing the weapon to the stricken warrior.

Geordie, for the moment, forgot his sufferings, the indignity that had been put upon him, and eagerly grabbed his present.

"Aw! 'Liza," he said, "how could you afford it? I asked the price of them and they were ten and six."

"That doesn't matter if you like it."

Geordie cuddled the gun under the cover with a sigh of satisfaction, and his mother motioned to Eliza to leave the room and let him rest.

Two days later Mrs. Laidlaw said she was very sorry, but

she felt too tired to get up.

Such a thing had never happened before and Eliza was bewildered. Mary had taken lumbago after influenza, and had to be saved as much as possible, so Eliza ran up and down stairs constantly for two days, and at the end of that time something happened to the instep of her right foot, and she could not sleep for pain. In the morning she *hirpled* about, not telling her mother for fear of worrying her, but secretly hurt that she did not notice it. It seemed so odd that her mother should lie there and not seem to care that everything was at sixes and sevens.

That was a dreadful day. Mary crawled about the kitchen bent double, the bell rang almost continuously with trifling errands, and Eliza, hopping to save her painful foot, answered it, and cooked and carried up meals, tidied rooms, attended to fires, and washed up.

After the early dinner Mrs. Laidlaw said she thought she would like to lie on the study sofa, so Eliza helped her to dress, and with her father's assistance got her comfortably laid by the study fire.

"This is nice," she said, looking so waxen that Eliza cried, "Mother, what's *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing but tiredness. I'll be all right in a day or two, I'm having such a good rest. It's a blessing I've nothing to get up for. Mr. Crockett is taking my class this week . . . Can you sit down now? You must be worn out."

A tall figure with a black bonnet and an old-fashioned sable stole came in at the gate. With relief in her tone Eliza cried—

"Why, here's Mrs. Service. I thought she wasn't coming home till Monday."

She limped out to meet the visitor, greeting her with—

"Mother isn't well, Mrs. Service. She lies in bed or on the sofa and looks so queer, but she won't get the doctor."

Mrs. Service looked through her spectacles at Eliza and said, "Ayhe, that's not so good. I'll just lay aside my bonnet, Miss Eliza, before I go in, if you don't mind. It whiles fidgets a sick body to see a visitor, and if I just sit there as if I belonged to the house, and go out if I see I'm tiring her.—What do ye think? Will I take my bonnet upstairs?"

"Oh," said Eliza, to whom stairs had suddenly become a burden, "don't trouble to do that." She opened the door of Jim's study. "Leave your things here and come in when you're ready."

It was odd what a difference it made having Mrs. Service. She behaved as if it were the most usual thing in the world to see her minister's busy wife lying on the sofa, and sat down beside her with a bit of sewing and began to relate just what she had been doing since last she had been in Blinkbonny.

It was infinitely soothing for the invalid to lie there, idle, and listen to the quiet voice meandering placidly on about the trials and tribulations of people she knew only by hearsay.

To Eliza, too, Mrs. Service brought comfort. She had noticed the limp, and without saying a word she motioned the girl to a low chair, and taking off her slipper, began gently to massage the aching foot. Eliza leant back telling herself that now she knew what a cat feels like when it purrs, while Mrs. Service ambled on . . .

"Ayhe, it's a treat to me to spend a few days at West Kilbride. Great luxury. A fire in ma room and hot water

brought in before every meal, and yet quite plain people, you understand, so that I'm quite at ease in their company. Mrs. Stewart used to take a house every year at Girvan, and it was there I got to know them, for, as I've often told you, we kept the shop in the village for many years—ma mother and Jeanie and me. Those were real happy days. Ayhe! Many a time I think on them. Mind you, a shop, a village shop's awful interesting. You hear all the news, and make real good friends. A fine time I had when I was a young thing. Oh, ye can laugh, Miss Eliza, but it's true. I did not wear specs then, and my hair was so thick and long I could sit on it. I was straight, too, and no ill-faured!" She looked over the top of her spectacles at Eliza. "And there was a good two or three that thought that, but, as ma mother used to put it, I never saw anybody I liked better than myself! Ayhe!"

"You must have a healing touch," Eliza told her as she put on her slipper. "You've made my foot feel so comfortable."

"Ay, but ye'll need a bandage on it the night; it's strained."

"And Mary has dreadful lumbago," Eliza went on. "Perhaps you'll go down and comfort her later on. She likes to be told remedies, though she won't try anything. I've given her plasters and lotions galore, but all she says is, Ach, Miss Eliza, take them away, nothing'll cure me till the time comes for the pain to go'."

"Poor Mary," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "I should be helping her, but I can't."

Mrs. Service glanced at her, but said nothing, and presently went on with her story.

"Mr. Stewart's delicate, I've often told you, and his wife too. I think it's such a good thing they're both that way; it's a pity when one's strong and one isn't, for the strong one is apt not to have much sympathy, and then trouble comes. As it is, the two of them can talk about their symptoms and compare their tonics and all that. Mr. Stewart'll say, 'Mamma, don't go into the conservatory without your shawl'—there's a conservatory off the drawing-room at The Elms, the flowers are a fair treat—and then she'll say, 'Papa, mind your lozenges, in case you get the tickle in your throat.' The two of them are as happy as birds, and been married forty years and five of a family all married or abroad."

She stopped to sigh, and Eliza said, "Mother, I think we'll have tea in here to-day. I'll fetch in a table. That won't worry you to come into the dining-room, and the boys hate it when you're not there for tea.—Mrs. Service, when was it you left the shop and married?"

Mrs. Service looked coyly at the minister's wife and said, "You mind that, don't you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Laidlaw said. " It was when Geordie was a baby—about twelve years ago."

"Ayhe—ayhe! " Mrs. Service smiled and shook her head. "I couldna leave ma mother and Jeanie, for ma mother was frail and Jeanie had bad asthma, poor thing. Robert waited for me five years.—His first wife died fairly young.—I was forty-eight and we had twelve years together. Robert was seventy when he died. Ayhe, I left it too long."

"But it was well worth while, the twelve years you had," Mrs. Laidlaw said.

Mrs. Service held her needle suspended. "Worth while?

Robert often said it would have been worth while waiting all Jacob's years for Rachel. Ye see—I don't want to say anything about the first wife, poor thing, but she was a poor manager, and Robert never knew what comfort meant till I went to his house; he often said that. And I told him it had been good training for him, he was so handy about helping me, and thoughtful! Always up in the morning lighting the fire and fetching me a cup of tea before I'd get up. A jewel of a husband if ever there was one—but it makes the loss all the greater now."

"But you have twelve happy years to treasure the thought of. I remember your marriage-day so well!"

"Ay, I wore bronze-green silk. Bronze-green was Robert's favourite colour. I took off ma mournings for ma mother and Jeanie just for that day. I was awful happy," she added simply.

Mrs. Laidlaw's conscience smote her as she remembered how amused she had been at the spectacled bride in her bronze-green gazing admiringly at the grey-bearded widower she was wedding.

Eliza made hot toast, and the boys and their father came in to tea. It was Geordie's first day at school since his tonsils had been removed, and he was very important.

"Did any one ask how you were feeling?" Eliza asked.

"No, but Jack Cameron said he thought I was dead," Geordie said proudly, "for I was away a whole fortnight."

"But he hadn't thought it worth while to ask," said Mr. Laidlaw. " Queer things little boys!"

When tea was over, " Now," he said, "we must help 'Liza to clear away," and seizing a jam-dish and a plate of scones he marched into the dining-room with them and pushed

them into the sideboard. He looked so pleased with himself that his daughter had not the heart to tell him that the pantry was the proper place. The boys were equally helpful, colliding in the hall with a milk-jug and a bread plate, which both went to their long home.

Eliza had to fetch a basin of water and a cloth and put right the damage done, and when she went back to the study Rob and Geordie were engaged in a fierce struggle for an exercise book. The book came in two and Geordie fell into the fender with a wild clatter.

His mother sprang up, alarmed, and when Eliza and his father had got Geordie on his feet again and turned to reassure her, they found that she was lying back on the cushions in a dead faint.

"She's dead," said Rob breathlessly, and followed by Geordie, left the room. This was something they could not cope with; their world had fallen suddenly about their ears; flight was imperative. Mary-from-Skye and the boot-cupboard suggested themselves as possible refuges, and to them they ran.

Mrs. Service, comforting Mary in the kitchen, flew to the study and immediately took charge of the situation. The doctor was sent for and Mrs. Laidlaw put to bed.

"Absolute quiet," was the doctor's command. "I'll send a nurse," he added.

While Walter Laidlaw sat with his wife, Mrs. Service helped Eliza to collect what would be needed in the sick-room. In spite of her anxiety she was in her element, and Eliza rather resented her obvious enjoyment and the way she took command of the situation.

"Ye must try and walk quietly, Miss Eliza, and not

bounce in and out of the bedroom." (Bounce! thought Eliza indignantly.) "And have ye a feeding-cup? Well, we'll have to send for one; the doctor says she mustn't move. If it's the heart, the least exertion might prove fatal. I know well with Robert—just a sneeze—" but Eliza had darted away.

Mrs. Service followed her downstairs to the kitchen. "Ye'll have a hot-water bag, of course?"

"They both leak; the boys had them when they had influenza."

"Dear, dear, we'll need to get a new one. And what about Benger's Food? I'd better make it now and have it ready for through the night. *No Benger's Food*? My, my!"

"Why should there be Benger's Food?" Eliza asked, goaded to rudeness.

"It's a thing every house should keep, it's so soothing to the stomach . . . Have ye a spirit-lamp?"

"I believe there's one somewhere. I'll go and look."

Mrs. Service followed her, talking all the time, advising, exhorting, creaking backwards and forwards the door of the cupboard in which Eliza rooted in the dark.

"And mind, Miss Eliza, whatever you do, never excite her in any way, don't worry her, don't tell her anything that happens, don't—"

At that moment Eliza gripped what felt like a spirit-lamp, but as she lifted it out Mrs. Service swung the door inward and Eliza dropped the lamp and bumped her head severely against the shelf. Then she entirely forgot her manners, forgot that Mrs. Service was elderly and a widow and was only trying to be kind and helpful. "*Will you shut up?*" said Eliza.

CHAPTER 12

"For there's nae luck aboot the house."—*Old Song.*

FOR a week Mrs. Laidlaw was very ill; a collapse, the doctor called it vaguely.

The nurse turned out to be a military-looking person, tall and straight, with some tact and a kind heart, who at once took in the whole situation, and viewing with sympathy Eliza's efforts to take her mother's place, was as little trouble as a strange woman could be in a disorganized household.

Mrs. Laidlaw had always arranged, and often cooked, the simple meals, and Eliza and Mary were quite unaccustomed to responsibility. Eliza knew vaguely that she ought to ask for the "English" side of a sirloin, and that the best boiling beef came from "the thick part of the runner," but chops and mince-collops were her chief standby, so that there was a certain monotony in the menus.

The nurse's evening meal, which she had when she got up for night duty, was a great problem, and Eliza laboriously made puddings with the cookery book open in her hand, and grilled chops till there was neither taste nor nourishment left in them. They were not good meals, but, because of Eliza's flushed face and anxious eyes, the nurse ate them with seeming relish.

Happily for Eliza she had little time to worry. At first her anxiety for her mother swallowed up all lesser anxieties, and by the time the doctor's visits had dropped to one each day she had become, in a way, accustomed to her new

responsibilities.

Nurse Coats stayed with them for a fortnight. She frankly adored Walter Laidlaw, she enjoyed the two boys, she petted Eliza, and made great friends with Mary-from-Skye.

"You have been good," Eliza said to her the night before she left. "I dreaded your coming because people so often say nurses are difficult in the house, but you've put up with bad cooking and all sorts of discomforts in the most angelic way. If you just knew how different everything is when Mother is up and about! And you've helped such a lot; I'm sure you've done heaps of things not expected of a nurse."

They were together in Eliza's room, a rather drab little chamber despite attempts to give it colour and personality.

Nurse laughed. "I'm glad I've given you a better opinion of the nursing profession. We are women working for our living, and often we have to insist on our rights, for you'd be surprised how often we are taken advantage of. If we give an inch, there are many anxious to take an ell. I knew when I entered this house that you were different. You were all such lambs—such lost lambs: Rob and Geordie wandering about shocked into unnatural virtue; your father so worried and courteous and gentle; you, poor child, staggering under the weight of responsibility suddenly thrown on you; and Mrs. Service fluttering about like a hen . . . I was grateful to you for the way you made me one of yourselves, let me share things with you, and, of course, I was only too glad to do anything I could to make things easier for you."

Eliza was sitting on a stool brushing her hair before going to bed. Nurse Coats stooped suddenly, took a handful

of the shining hair and held it to her face.

"You've lovely hair, child. There's something so vital about it—whatever you do, don't bob or shingle."

"But that's just what I want to do," Eliza said seriously, the brush suspended in her hand. "I'd love to be bobbed and look like one of Shakespeare's pages, but they won't let me. Mother says it's horrid, and Father goes away back to St. Paul."

"How old are you? " Nurse Coats asked.

"Nearly twenty. I'm getting quite old."

"Twenty? It sounds almost laughable to me . . . I'm forty-eight. Yes, no wonder you look aghast. I've been working for eight-and-twenty years, and I've nothing before me but work, going from house to house trying to do my best, always meaning to be amiable and unselfish, but not always succeeding."

"But it must be an interesting life, never knowing where you're going next . . ."

"Y-e-s; that palls after a bit. The nursing is always interesting; it's the rest that's difficult—the people in the house, the leisure time. I do get some contrasts. Lately I was six weeks with a lady who had broken her leg, in a big house in the depths of the country. I had a room of my own, my meals were brought to me there, I never saw a soul to speak to except my patient. I went out for my daily walk through damp shrubberies or strolled in the garden and tried to imagine what it would be like in June, and came in again to my lonely comfort. It would have been so easy to have sent me sometimes into the nearest country town—there were two cars doing nothing—or shown me some of the interesting places round; but it never seemed to

occur to any one. Still, it was a fine rest, and I was glad of it. From there I went straight to a little newly-married flat, where the husband was very ill with pneumonia. Everything was so new and fresh, the carpets, the curtains, the satin eiderdowns . . . When Mr. Murray-Garstin the specialist came, he took the beautiful satin eiderdown and flung it off. 'Take it away,' he said. The little distraught wife looked helplessly at her treasured possession, and I managed to bundle them both out of the room. That was a tremendous tussle, but we won. When the doctor said he would live, the little wife dropped on her knees, and I couldn't help doing the same . . . That moment made up for a lot . . ."

"I should think so," said Eliza, brushing her hair thoughtfully.

"Next I went to a pretentious villa where a nurse was expected to be also a domestic servant. There was money and to spare, so I had no compunction about letting them see that their idea was a mistaken one, and I've no doubt the lady has described me to all her circle as both useless and exacting. I like decent clothes, and always try to have one decently cut coat and skirt. She eyed me one day when I was going out and said, 'It's easy seen nurses are overpaid when you can afford clothes like that. I've to be content with "reach me downs"!' Her housekeeping consisted of sordid and unnecessary economies, and she grudged every bite I ate . . . It's silly and petty to brood over such things, but they hurt. You can imagine what it was like to come from that miserable house to your home! It was like being suddenly reminded of something exquisite that one had almost forgotten existed: there are surprisingly few real

homes . . . But I daresay, misguided child, you only think of it as dull."

"Not dull exactly, but—"

"Yes. Well, I only wish I could enjoy the dullness a little longer. Remember, your mother isn't nearly well yet: it'll be a long time before she is her old energetic self."

"She shouldn't do anything for weeks and weeks? "

"Well, certainly she must not try to begin going up and down to church and taking her class and that sort of worrying work, but try to get her to take an interest in little household things, get her to go out as much as possible, and keep her thoughts off herself."

"But Mother never thought of herself—that's what made her ill."

"Yes, but now, because she is still weak and nervous, Mrs. Laidlaw's absorbed in her own feelings."

"But that's a good thing."

"Not at all a good thing. No one was ever the better of fussing about their own feelings. Your mother is practically well, infinitely better than when she was toiling up and down and looking after you all, never giving a grumble. Now she grumbles quite a lot, grumbling's a healthy sign—but don't let her go on being an invalid. Try to rouse her—"

Eliza shook her head. "I don't think Mother likes bracing treatment. Are you sure she hasn't got any obscure trouble? She told me yesterday that she didn't think the doctor had ever really discovered what was wrong with her. She has a pain at her heart, and she thinks it is *angina*."

"No, Mrs. Laidlaw hasn't really a pain, but it's just as bad as if she had. She *thinks* she has, so she feels it."

"Do you mean to say that you can *think* yourself into a

pain?"

Nurse Coats nodded.

"And can you think yourself out of one?"

"Ah, that's not so easy. I'm only warning you that you're in for rather a difficult time persuading your mother that she is really well, but as she has overworked herself for years for you, it's only right that you should take your turn."

"Oh dear, yes," Eliza said stoutly, "I'm glad of the chance," and she went to bed seeing herself a Florence Nightingale.

But at nineteen it is easy to weary in well-doing.

At first, after Nurse Coats took her reluctant departure, Eliza leapt up in the morning to be down and carry an appetizing tray to her mother, but it was disconcerting to meet, instead of the commendation she expected and felt she deserved, merely sighs over a wakeful night, or complaints about the toughness of the toast or the lack of crispness in the bacon.

It was a revelation to Eliza how illness could change, or seem to change, a person's nature. Her mother, once so appreciative of the slightest little service, now seemed to notice nothing done for her, but was quick to complain of any deficiency. It was almost funny. One evening Eliza happened to wonder aloud if there were enough milk in the house for the boys' supper and her mother's Benger's Food. Immediately Mrs. Laidlaw said, "Well, whatever you do, don't stint me!"

Another time when Geordie coughed Eliza was going to rub him with camphorated oil at bed-time; his mother said, "See that his door is properly shut so that I won't be

disturbed."

Eliza and the boys stared open-eyed. Hitherto when Geordie coughed his mother had spent half the night running between his room and her own.

The whole family occupied much time trying to put heart into their mother. She was quite sure that the doctors were deceiving her and that she was doomed.

"I know best myself," she said in a hopeless tone. "I know I'm losing strength, I'm sure I have a temperature every night, and I cough so much . . ."

"But you're gaining weight," Eliza reminded her. Mrs. Laidlaw smiled, a weary, unbelieving smile. " So you say—"

"I don't say so," Eliza persisted, "it's the weighing-machine. Now, you're going to tell me how to make marmalade the proper old-fashioned way. Mary only knows about using all the orange. You boil it and strain it and then put in the peel, don't you? —Geordie, run and ask Mary for the peel I put aside—we'll cut it into snippets, Mother, you, and I.—Do you stew them beforehand or what?"

It was a dreary time for a young girl, but perhaps Eliza did not feel the monotony and confinement as much as some would—she had two unfailing consolations, her dreams and her books.

Up to now she had kept mainly to the poets and the novelists of a past age, but one day she got from the library a book which absolutely fascinated her—*Java Head.* From the first page she had been enthralled. The house at Salem—Laurel Ammidon lying in bed considering the different aspects of chairs: "The carved teak-wood chair that the grandfather had brought home from China, which

had never varied from the state of a brown benevolent dragon . . . the severe waxed hickory, an accommodating and precise old gentleman, and the spindling gold chairs in the drawing-room were supercilious creatures at a King's ball; the graceful impressive formality of the Hepplewhites belonged to the loveliest of Boston ladies . . . while the deep easy-chair before the library fire was a ship . . ."

Eliza saw it all and hugged herself with delight.

Only now and then could she read snatches, for interruptions were many and frequent, but one afternoon there was peace for a little. Her mother was asleep on the sofa in the study, Mrs. Service sewing beside her. Eliza was free till tea-time. Seizing her book, she flung herself into a chair beside the dining-room fire and gave herself up to complete enjoyment.

Eagerly she read, yet slowly, for she wanted to spin the book out as long as she could, going back again and again over the parts she had particularly liked. The description of Captain Ammidon's Manchu wife—which seemed to make warmth and light and fragrance pour out from the printed page—in her blue-black satin coat embroidered in peach-coloured flower petals and innumerable minute sapphires and orange butterflies . . . red jade buttons . . . indigo high-soled slippers crusted and tasselled with pearls . . .

She read on and on, the end was getting horribly near. She was standing with Roger Bervard in the cold harbour, looking at the *Nautilus* with her high-stemmed bowsprit pointing outwards. The shipmaster wore a beaver hat, Kate Vollar a bright red shawl . . . Eliza was there: she saw it all. She knew just what Roger felt when the ship bound for the East drove out to the open sea . . . and the red shawl

streamed out . . .

She sat up with a start. Mary was beginning to put out the tea things. A quarter past four: the boys would soon be in: guiltily she ran into the study.

"Where have you been, Eliza?" her mother's voice greeted her. "I wanted my smelling-bottle, Mrs. Service couldn't find it."

"Here it is . . . Had you a nice sleep?"

Mrs. Service answered for the invalid. "Ay, she had; but a sleep makes ye real crazy. She'll be all the better for her tea . . . You're yawning, Mrs. Laidlaw. Ye know the old saying? *Gantin' bodes wantin', sleep, meat, or makin' of—*"

"Tea is nearly ready," Eliza said, "and there's a nice fire in the dining-room. Father and the boys'll be here any minute. Shall we go in now?"

"Oh, I think so," Mrs. Laidlaw said. "A cup of tea will perhaps put a little life into me. Where's my shawl? No, no, warm it, Eliza, before you give it to me. I chill so easily and you are so reckless."

Eliza knelt before the fire with the shawl held out, then she wrapped her mother in its fleecy folds, and putting her arm round her shoulders, helped her across the hall, saying, "Come along then, old Mother, and see if tea will cheer you up. Mrs. Learmond has sent you some lovely fruit, Mrs. Hartree a sponge-cake so light that it almost floats, and I'll make some very buttery toast, and here comes Father, so life isn't so very black after all."

Mrs. Laidlaw allowed herself to be coaxed into cheerfulness. Mr. Laidlaw, smiling at his daughter, said, "What a blessing you keep well and cheerful, 'Liza ! "

"Oh," said Eliza, "I'm like Phemie Brown in the church,

'I get off awfu' safe'," but while she laughed and talked nonsense, and Mrs. Service smiled contentedly and said "Ayh" at intervals, Eliza was still in the Salem Harbour watching the red shawl blow out in the cold wind . . . There *was* colour in life: she held on to that.

CHAPTER 13

"There's a cure for everything but stark deid."—*Old Saying.*

MRS. LAIDLAW did not improve rapidly, and when Jim returned for the spring vacation she was still miserable in mind and body.

Jim, though sympathetic up to a point, was inclined to be amused to see his little busy mother, who had never given a thought to herself and had scorned to worry about her health, now wearing fleece-lined boots and woolly coats, and shuddering at the thought of a possible draught. He soon grew tired of listening to her symptoms and hearing of the probable end of her sufferings.

"But there's nothing really wrong with you, Mother," he protested, "you only need to get your strength up," which offended his mother so deeply that Eliza had to be called in as mediator.

Jim was amazed at his sister's patience, at the ingenuity with which she contrived to find small occupations and amusements for her mother. In these few weeks it seemed to him their positions had been reversed. Mrs. Laidlaw now leant on Eliza's strength. The boys would come running in to say, "Mother says we may go to the match; may we, 'Liza?" Their father, too, would bring some communication he had received and say in his vague way, "Do you know what should be done about this?" and Eliza, surprisingly, seemed able to cope with everything.

But Jim felt that his sister was being unduly put upon. It hardly needed the words of one of the church people who

had asked him how his mother was, and added, "And poor Miss Eliza's had to work like a mairrit womman," to make him see that his sister's shoulders were too young for the burden laid upon them.

He found her one day with brows anxiously puckered over the household books.

"We need so much more milk and cream and fresh butter," she said, "and of course I'm not half the manager Mother is. She can make a roast last about a week, but with me it's a case of once hot, once cold, once curry! Would you rather have kippers or sausages to breakfast tomorrow?"

"Sausages."

Eliza sighed. "Kippers are cheaper."

"Well—kippers then. Hang it all, I don't care what we have to eat. What I feel is that we're putting on you, old 'Liza; why should you have to drudge like this?"

"There's no one else to do it."

"But if you weren't here some one else would have to do it."

"Yes, but being here I can't let any one else do it, stupid! Besides, I'm glad to do it. It's something to have a job, to be wanted. I'm really quite happy." She nodded at her brother—"Yes, I am."

Jim gave a sceptical grunt.

"But you never have any time for yourself; you're stuck here: you get no fun."

"Oh, I know, but the funny thing is I don't seem to want fun. For the moment I've lost taste for it. You can't—at least I can't—do two things at once. The other day Mrs. Neish made me go with her to an afternoon concert, and

tea at the studio after, and when I got back I was in a vile temper all evening. The little outing had spoiled me for my job for the time being. Everything seemed so terribly dull and petty to come back to, and I was impatient with poor Mother when she complained, and the boys seemed unusually rude and noisy, and Father more absent-minded. It took a night's rest to get me right . . . But when we are jogging along it's wonderful what nice little things crop up. You become so grateful for small things . . . just the fire burning brightly, and the sun shining on a pot of daffodils even the thought that there is raspberry jam for tea! Or I manage to make Mother laugh, or Mrs. Service says something unexpectedly funny . . . and books mean more—" She stopped and then said solemnly, "I don't think I could have got through without Shakespeare."

Jim laughed. "Funny old 'Liza! All the same I don't like it. Such resignation would be all right at forty-five; it's absurd at nineteen. It's only because you don't know what you're missing that you stick it at all."

"What's the use of making me discontented when I *have* to stick it? Mother is really getting stronger, though she doesn't believe it. I can see a difference from week to week, and the summer's coming and we'll get away to Corhope." She threw out her arms. "It's just because I'm nineteen that I don't mind—I've time to make up."

Jim did manage to get a breathing-space for his sister. He suggested a week-end at a hydropathic, remembering that his mother had once wistfully said how much she would enjoy staying at one of these establishments. He could afford it, he said, having placed some stories rather well. "Bilge," he pronounced them to his father, adding, "Later

on, I hope to be able to afford to write decent stuff."

Walter Laidlaw stroked his hair thoughtfully as he regarded his son. "I wonder if that's quite the way to set about it. I don't believe in writing down; it's difficult to take yourself up again, however—"

They started on a Friday morning, Mrs. Laidlaw very much wrapped up and afraid of draughts, Eliza prepared to be interested and amused with everything, Jim filled with the gloomiest forebodings, for he distrusted all hydropathics.

This particular one turned out to be a large and very gaudy erection set among beautiful surroundings. Several people entered the motor-bus that was waiting at the station, and as Jim surveyed them his spirits sank lower. Nor did the hydropathic, when they reached it, do anything to dispel his gloom. The lounge which they had to pass through was overheated to a degree. Fat, over-dressed women, depressed-looking men, and a good many girls, some with repellent voices and impudent eyes, sat about waiting for the gong to sound for luncheon.

Eliza, shyly averting her eyes, followed her mother into the lift. It took some time to reassure Mrs. Laidlaw about her bedroom. She wondered if the sheets had been properly aired and who had last occupied the bed. Looking dubiously at the blankets she said, " It may have been some one far gone with tuberculosis."

"Or it may not," Eliza said briskly. "Oh, look at the pine woods over there, and the river, and the blue hills beyond! And this is quite a comfortable armchair! If it's too ghastly downstairs you can sit up here with a fire."

"I don't suppose I'll be able to sit much downstairs," said

Mrs. Laidlaw, but, as it turned out, she was the only one of the party who was able to do it.

Among the motley gathering in the lounge she quickly made friends. Jim and Eliza coming in from a walk found her close in talk with a middle-aged woman whom she introduced to them as Mrs. Finlay from Dowanhill. Mrs. Finlay was accompanied by two daughters, undersized young women with drab complexions and strong Glasgow accents.

"Mrs. Finlay suffers from nerve trouble," Mrs. Laidlaw said, with something of melancholy satisfaction in her voice.

The lady in question shook her head.

"Two years now," she said, "and I'd give a thousand pounds to be the Mrs. Finlay I once was."

"You're improving, Mother," said one of her daughters.

"Well, Bella, I don't know. I often think I'll never be better.—Nerves are the despair of doctors," she finished rather proudly.

"Tea'll cheer you up," said the other daughter, as small tables dotted about the lounge were covered with white cloths on which were placed cups and saucers and plates of eatables. Maids with large white-metal teapots filled the cups.

After tea Mrs. Laidlaw went up to her room, but she was so interested in her new friend that she wanted to talk rather than rest.

"Her symptoms are exactly like mine, but she seems to have a more sympathetic doctor. I do think that Dr. Gordon has never realized how ill I am. My heart has a distinct murmur, and I feel my lungs aren't right. Mrs.

Finlay says her doctor is so careful."

"But," said Eliza, "Mrs. Finlay doesn't seem to me to have much the matter with her. She ate two new cookies to tea, and shortbread."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked reproachfully at her daughter as she said, "She tells me her life is torture. 'Pure purgatory' is how she described it. If it weren't for these two daughters she wouldn't care to live."

All evening the two ladies sat in close converse, while Jim read a book in the smoking-room and Eliza carried on a halting conversation with the Miss Finlays. It was hard work, and at ten o'clock she rose thankfully and said she thought her mother should be in bed.

"Ah yes," Mrs. Finlay agreed. " She's a frail creature, Miss Laidlaw. Be good to her. I've given her the address of a specialist who, I think, would understand her case. Two years I've been ill, going from hydro to hydro, so I can't give your mother much hope. She looks to me as if her lungs were affected, her complexion's far too pure . . . I don't want to alarm you, of course, but it's no good living in a fool's paradise . . ."

Eliza glared vindictively, but said nothing save a curt good-night. Mrs. Laidlaw had got so much food for thought from her new friend that she passed a restless night and was so low next morning that it was all Eliza could do to persuade her to rise and go downstairs to consult Jim.

"Let's go home," said that youth; "I hate this place and every one in it. I'd rather spend the week-end in a cabman's shelter."

"It's a pity," said Eliza, "when we took the trouble to come. And, after all, it is a change for Mother."

Jim thought for a minute. "Look here," he said, " what's to hinder us going on to Tweedfoot? Easie Baxter would take us in; no one else will be there just now. Dash it all, we can't stay here. I tell you what, I'll get a car, it's only about seventeen miles, and that will give Mother lots of air."

He had cheered up wonderfully at the prospect of getting away, and set off to tell his mother.

She demurred at first, for Mrs. Finlay had a horrid fascination for her, but she finally consented to leave after luncheon.

It was a cold early April day, and as they took their way through the glen between the green hills, sharp showers of hail met them. Mrs. Laidlaw, bowing her head to the blast, announced that probably this would be the end of her, and thought her children heartless when they merely smiled. Tweedfoot was the nearest village to Corhope, and when they arrived at the little inn Easie Baxter, warned by a wire of their arrival, stood on the doorstep in her neat black dress and little satin apron to welcome them. Through the open door of the sitting- room they could see a large fire blazing, and the smell of new-baked scones was in the air.

"This is a bit better than the hydro," said Jim.

"And ye'll be needin' yer denner late," said Easie. "For a blessing the butcher's cairt came efter the telegram and I got some chops, an' a bit steak for the morn's nicht, and I've made a rale kinna guid aipple-dumplin', an' I've some guid thick cream, for Jeanie at Hill-foot skimmed the best o' a milk-bine for me. Ay, I was hearin' ye werena weel, mem, but my! ye're lookin' fine! Sic a grand colour! Ye're mair like a young lassie than the mither o' thae bairns.

C'wa up to your room. I've been airin' the bed a' day: ye needna be feared for the sheets—they're weel toasted. And a pig in the bed and a'—"

Mrs. Laidlaw made a hearty evening meal, warmly commending the apple-dumpling and the cream, and later, snug by the fire, with no sound outside but the splash of the linn and the hooting of owls, she recalled old days, and was more like her usual cheerful self than she had been for months.

" 'Liza," said Jim, when their mother was safe in bed, "I believe we've discovered the cure for neurasthenia— a course of Mrs. Finlay, icy indifference, and sleet showers."

CHAPTER 14

"There's no' a muir in my ain land but's fu' o' sang the day."
LADY JOHN SCOTT.

FROM that day Mrs. Laidlaw really did begin to improve, though she had frequent small relapses. But the bright weather came, and Eliza persuaded her to go for a walk every morning in the park and watch the flowers come out and the children play, and in the afternoons they rode on the tops of cars to distant suburbs to get the air, and then it was tea-time, and some one generally came in whose talk interested the invalid, so that she had little time to worry about herself, and went to bed healthily tired.

In June they went to Corhope, and there the restoration of Mrs. Laidlaw to health was sudden but complete.

Rob and Geordie had long since cast off the slough of artificial virtue which had enveloped them at the beginning of their mother's illness, and were now following their own wild wills, never visible except at meals, and often not even then. They spent their days trekking over the hills with their boon companion, Willie Veitch, fishing in far-off burns, inventing strange and intricate games, or lying in the rafters above the henhouse, with the midsummer sun hot on their heads through the sky-light, telling each other rambling tales of adventure, that went on endlessly.

One night Eliza was wakened by a hand clutching at her, and sitting up she found Geordie standing by her bed, shivering.

"I feel so queer," he said, "and Rob won't wake up. Let

me into your bed, Elijah," and Eliza, still half asleep, happed him up and cuddled him and asked where the pain was.

"What were you eating yesterday, Sonnie?"

"Oh, I dunno. Nothing much. The usual things, I suppose."

Eliza thought over the events of the previous day and asked—

"What had you for your 'piece' when you were fishing?"

"Hard-boiled eggs and . . . scones with rhubarb jam . . . and chocolate biscuits."

It sounded innocent enough.

"Nothing else, you're sure?" Eliza persisted.

After some thought Geordie remembered that he had finished his repast with some pears taken from the garden of a ruined cottage.

"Were they ripe?"

Geordie admitted that they had been rather stony-hearted, and that Rob and Willie had thrown theirs away.

"I like crunching my teeth into hard things," he explained.

Eliza said nothing, but appendicitis seemed to be written on the darkness in bright letters of flame.

All night Geordie tossed. At five o'clock the first goods train rumbled sleepily through the valley. Geordie turned a flushed face to his sister and said wistfully, "It's a cheery sound a train, Elijah."

"How is the pain now?"

"About the same as the last time you asked."

Eliza got up and went to her mother's room.

"Geordie's not quite well—indigestion, I think; but I'm

going to harness the pony and go for the doctor. There's nothing to be anxious about, of course."

Eliza, with a set face, drove the sluggish white pony along the dew-spangled roadside at a rate that caused that petted animal to feel resentfully that something had gone entirely wrong with life.

Hens clucked round cottages, a yellow cat slunk across the road, home from a night's marauding, cows were being driven in for milking. When she reached the little town, women shaking their mats and exchanging morning greetings with neighbours looked curiously at the girl in the trap so early astir.

A maid-servant with a tousled head said that the doctor did not start on his rounds till ten o'clock, and wanted to know if it was an urgent case. Eliza felt that she could hardly call it an urgent case, and, as it seemed feeble to plead anxiety, she merely left a request that the doctor would call at Corhope as soon as possible.

When he came he did not say much, but promised to come back again in the evening.

Eliza wandered out into the hot, sunny stable-yard. Rob was kicking stones about, looking miserably out of employment, and Eliza remembered an old-fashioned poem her mother liked to say to them:

> "O call my brother back to me,
> I cannot play alone . . ."

Somehow the sentiment didn't seem laughable to-day. Tom had gone. Tom had been just as strong and as riotous as Geordie. No one had ever been less like dying. And it was

no good saying that some things were too bad to happen. Anything might happen. Why, one friend of her mother's had lost four sons in the War.

Geordie's bicycle, battered and ill-used, with one pedal tied on with string, stood against a wall. Only the night before he had sprung from it and challenged his sister in the words of one of the desperadoes in his paper-boarded books, whipping from his trouser pocket a cap-pistol . . . Why, Eliza asked herself, were boys so exasperating in health and so intolerably pathetic when they lay ill? It didn't seem fair.

"Hullo," said Rob, giving the paling a vindictive kick.

" Where's Willie?" Eliza asked.

"Don't know."

"Don't you want to play with him?"

"Not without Geordie," said Rob, and added, "I've given him my gully-knife."

By the greatness of the sacrifice Eliza could gauge the depths of Rob's feelings.

She went into the house. Geordie had been taken into a spare room. The blinds were down to keep out the sun, and he was dozing feverishly. The gully-knife lay on his pillow.

It was not appendicitis, but he was sharply ill for several days, and it was then that Mrs. Laidlaw threw off the last traces of invalidism. She insisted on sleeping on the couch in Geordie's room, forgot there was such a thing as a draught, neglected her various tonics, ate without thinking whether or not she would be the worse for it, and when the fever went down and the bad symptoms subsided she was a well woman.

Afterwards Geordie alluded to his convalescence as the

happiest time of his life.

"You were all kind to me," he said—("As if," said Eliza, "we were in the habit of ill-treating him!") "and I had Percival."

Percival was a collie-pup which at once became the idol of the two boys. They would sit for hours on the lawn, while the puppy lay between them sound asleep (his head on a silk handkerchief thoughtfully provided by Rob), brooding over him tenderly.

When Rob thought that Geordie was well enough to stand the shock he asked back the gully-knife

It was a good thing that Mrs. Laidlaw regained her usual vigour when she did, for an event occurred which needed all her energy to cope with it.

Jim's friend, Gerald Meade, wrote that he was to be in Scotland, and Jim could not do less than invite him to Corhope.

It may seem an occasion hardly worthy of mention, but Jim had so impressed his family with the wonder of his friend that they almost felt as if they were entertaining a denizen from another world.

The boys regarded the whole thing frankly as a nuisance. They foresaw longer meals, more attention paid to clean hands and collars, a certain amount of ceremony—all extremely distasteful at any time, but in the holidays absolutely horrible. They did not mind ordinary visitors—people from far and near who came in hordes to tea, ate largely of the delicious scones and butter and feather-light cakes, enjoyed Mrs. Laidlaw's company, and departed satisfied—they could be avoided by boys slinking in by back ways. And the guests Walter Laidlaw and his wife

invited to stay were, as a rule, such as could recompense them not again. Mrs. Service for instance, was always welcome. She sat and sewed on the lawn, and drove out in the pony-cart, and enjoyed everything earnestly; and other run-down, town-worn workers who occupied from time to time the best spare room that looked through rowan berries to the purple hills, interfered in no way at all with life as it was lived at Corhope—but this Gerald Meade! They were tired of him long before they beheld him.

That gentleman, happily unaware of the feelings the thought of his arrival had evoked, was looking forward with interest to his visit. He admired affectionately his friend Laidlaw, and was anxious to meet his people. There was a sister, he knew, and some young children, as well as the clergyman father, and mother.

He was a simple soul, Gerald Meade, and would have been mightily astonished had he known that his coming perturbed any one, and that his hostess had lain awake at night wondering what she should feed him on.

To Eliza the visit was like the beginning of a new era.

For more than six months, she told herself, she had hardly been living at all—not to call living; she had been doing her duty, which was not quite the same thing. She only realized now when her mother had again taken the weight of things on her own shoulders how crushed she had been. And yet, looking back, she could not say it had been an unhappy time; there had been a satisfaction, an odd content. Was it something, she asked herself, of the content felt by the meek women in convents who had given up earthly hopes and pleasures?

But now it was high summer and a knight was coming

riding . . .

She felt desperately shy as she went with her mother to the door to welcome the guest. Mrs. Laidlaw said all that was kind as well as all that was necessary, but Eliza's tongue refused to utter a word.

Jim carried his friend away to have a wash, and Eliza was left with an impression of a stocky figure, a somewhat dirty face and tousled hair.

"Rather untidy," her mother commented, "but he's come a long way. I can't understand how people escape sunstroke motoring without a hat, but he has a good thatch of hair. I hope Mrs. Scott's remembering the lettuce for the salad. Just run and see, Eliza, and be sure and make the dressing yourself."

Jim had prevailed on his mother to make their evening meal a more important one, and the visitor would have been difficult to satisfy had he not enjoyed the trout caught that day by the boys, cold lamb, with salad from the garden, strawberries and thick cream. As a great concession, coffee was served, brewed at the sideboard by Eliza and greatly enjoyed by Mr. Laidlaw, to whom it was a rare treat.

Rob and Geordie sat with soap-polished faces and sleeked hair, munching silently and regarding with grave intentness the face of the new-comer. Apart from the fact that he wore a dinner jacket, which they could not but regard as an affectation, they rather approved of him. His eyes twinkled at them, and he seemed to have no foolish prejudices against people meddling with his car. They knew all there was to know about the different makes of cars, and the mere fact that this young man had brought his

with him raised him at a bound from an incubus to a valued addition to the household.

Eliza in a white dress—"My sister Lisa," as Jim had called her to his friend—sat demurely by her father's side, looking the very picture of what a minister's daughter should be, but Gerald Meade gathered from the few remarks she made that she was not quite the prim, self-satisfied young woman she appeared.

The next day was gloriously fine and the young people were out of doors from morning till night, and when they gathered for the evening meal all stiffness had gone from the atmosphere. Rob and Geordie fawned like spaniels on their new friend, while Jim and Eliza, on the other side of the table, chaffed all three.

"One moment, children," Mr. Laidlaw said, breaking in on the laughter, and, holding out his hand for quiet, he asked for a blessing on the meal.

"A blessing from the blue!" said Jim. "It's the second, you know, Father?"

Mr. Laidlaw shook his head, and "I grow forgetful," he said.

"We're none the worse of two," said his wife briskly . . . "Well, and what did you do to-day?"

She looked at her guest, who replied, "All manner of things. We went right up among the hills, through a most lovely glen, and had a jolly good lunch, and fished, and Jim and I climbed a hill for the view, and when we got back Miss Lisa had lit a fire and boiled the kettle for tea."

"*I* lit the fire," Rob cried indignantly, while Geordie added, " And *I* fetched all the sticks and blew like a bellows till I felt all gone inside. 'Liza only spread a cloth and laid

out things . . . and, oh, Father, there was a hedgehog and it was . . ."

"On a walking tour," Rob broke in; "at least we met it going up, and when we came back it was quite a bit farther on."

"It was a very nice beast," Geordie said in a tenderly reminiscent murmur.

"Yes," said Jim. "Geordie should go down to history as the only person who has ever kissed a hedgehog."

"Why not?" asked Geordie, flushing crimson. "Hedgehogs are a lot nicer than most people."

"Of course they are," Gerald Meade supported his young admirer. "I've a great weakness for hedgehogs myself."

Mrs. Laidlaw smiled at the frank-eyed young man who had such a kindly way with small boys. Before his arrival Jim had begged her, "Don't rag Meade, Mother. He wouldn't understand."

"Rag?" Mrs. Laidlaw looked much astonished. "Am I in the habit of ragging young men?"

"Oh well, you know you make poor Ewan's life a burden to him when he comes here. I don't say he minds, but . . ."

"Oh, Ewan Cameron! It's only because he is such a dreamy soul, I want to waken him up. I laugh at him for his good. I'm very fond of Ewan. But I promise to be on my dignity with Mr. Meade."

And she had kept her word, and for the first twenty-four hours of his visit had certainly trod the measure "high and disposedly."

Now she said, "You have no young brothers, I think, Mr. Meade?"

"None, worse luck! There are only my mother and

myself."

"Then you will have to be everything to your mother, son and daughter in one. Doesn't she grudge letting you away in the holidays?"

"Not a bit," said Gerald cheerfully. "I tell her she likes to get rid of me."

Mrs. Laidlaw was obviously unconvinced. "Wouldn't she have come with you to Scotland? I don't like to think of her alone."

"Well, as a matter of fact she has people staying with her just now. She isn't often quite alone. She has a great friend who makes our place her headquarters when she is in England. What? Yes, it is rather a jolly old place . . . But I like this frightfully. It's so fresh and wind-swept and . . . wide." He looked out of the windows at the purple stretch of heather that lay beyond the garden, and Eliza said—

"It's good that you are seeing the heather out, but I wish you could have seen the garden in its moment of beauty. That is in July when the poppies are out rose-red—masses of them. When the sun shines on them and the white-washed house and the three sentinel pine trees, it really is rather nice."

"It must be," said Gerald. Then he grinned cheerfully. "But I'm quite contented with it as it is."

The moon that came up that night behind the Lammerlaw looked down on the household at Corhope, looked down also on Sophie Meade as she walked with her friend, Grace Chichester, in the garden at King John's Lodge.

Mrs. Meade was a dainty small creature with a fragile

Dresden-china look, very unlike her friend, who was tall and impressive.

"Where did you say Gerald was?" Miss Chichester asked as they paced slowly in the formal Dutch garden.

"He has been with the Frasers in Perthshire and now he is staying in the south of Scotland with a college friend, Jim Laidlaw—I had a letter from Gerald to-night, he sounds very happy. He does enjoy being in a family."

"You don't know these Laidlaws?"

"Only the son, who is at Balliol with Gerald. He has been here more than once, a clever ambitious boy. I like him. His father is a Scots minister, not well-off, and he's educating himself. He writes rather charmingly, stories and sketches, and isn't at all affected; simple and well-mannered. He likes to talk about his home and his people, and Gerald writes that he finds them delightful."

Grace Chichester looked affectionately at her friend. "You are so good about not trying to keep your boy to yourself. I don't believe Gerald has a notion how you miss him."

Mrs. Meade gave a little laugh. "Why should he? I'd simply hate to have him feel that he had to give up his time to me. I don't want to be a demanding mother."

"You certainly are not that, but you can't deny that you're a doting one."

"Oh, I am; but though I dote, I know quite well that it is only to me Gerald seems wonderful: he is really a very ordinary young man, rather plain, not very clever . . ."

Grace Chichester laughed as she laid a hand on her friend's shoulder and said, "You funny little person! You look like a bit of apple blossom, but the real you is more

like a strong pine tree . . . How long have we been friends, Sophie? More than a quarter of a century. Heavens, how old we are! That school in Paris . . . We belong to the 'nineties—almost. I can remember the *Yellow Book*, and being taken to see Dorothea Baird in *Trilby*. Was it 1898 we came out? And you married Billy in September just before the Boer War. We were all here, you remember, and Billy took out his watch and said, 'War, bloody war, will begin in ten minutes,' and we thought it rather a joke—old Paul Kruger and all the rest of it. How odd it all seems now! We went into it so light-heartedly, but hearts were to break."

She turned a large square emerald round her finger thoughtfully while her friend said—

"I've tried to make Gerald what Billy would have wanted his son to be, healthy and clean, and keen about the things Billy was keen about; but a mother can only go so far—I expect there is a girl somewhere who will complete the work."

Sophie Meade drew the embroidered Chinese shawl which she wore closer around her as if she felt suddenly cold, and Grace Chichester said, almost angrily—

"Being a mother, it seems to me, is an over-rated business. It's nothing but a long giving up, first to school, then to college, then to the claims of his friends and sport, and finally to some wretched girl—"

"Who in her turn will have to start giving up," Sophie reminded her friend.

CHAPTER 15

"How well I know what I mean to do
When the long dark autumn evenings come."
By the Fireside.

GERALD MEADE stayed a fortnight at Corhope instead of the few days he had at first intended, and went off regretfully then, while the Laidlaws prepared to return to Glasgow.

It was dull work to leave Corhope, to leave the hills and the burns, the bracken turning golden, the garden full of gaudy autumnal flowers, the cool milk-house, the much-loved animals, and go back to suburban Glasgow. For nights before they left, Rob and Geordie bedewed their pillows with tears, and through the day made themselves unbearable to live with: it was a wretched business.

But once back in Glasgow it was surprising how quickly every one became reconciled to the inevitable, and settled down with a fairly good grace to the winter's work. Blinkbonny could never be Corhope, but it was not without its merits. Eliza was deeply interested in making the new drawing-room look as nice as possible. She had brought home branches of hips and haws, and armfuls of honesty, to bring a breath of the Tweedside garden into the South-side villa. They did not last, but they solaced the first week of what Geordie called "Corhope sickness."

Rob and Geordie went back to school with all the appearance of Christian martyrs. Their ill-used faces drew from their mother a bracing lecture on the advantages that

were theirs. She pointed out how grateful they should be to have money spent on their education.

"Ho," said Rob bitterly, "imagine paying for being taught! We should be paid for sticking it!"

"Some day," prophesied Mrs. Laidlaw—"some day when you're both errand boys you will look back, perhaps, and realize what you've missed."

"I'm going to be a gamekeeper," Geordie said. "Gamekeepers don't need mathematics."

"The world is getting so rapidly poorer," his mother told him, "that when you grow up few people will be able to afford gamekeepers."

"I wouldn't mind being a tramp," said Rob. "I'd be outside anyway."

Mrs. Laidlaw was a thankful woman that autumn. She felt better in health than she had done for years, and was ready to throw herself with energy into the church work. And Eliza was thankful too. Looking back to the early spring and her mother's illness, she wondered how she had ever struggled through, for now it seemed so good to see the busy little figure running everywhere, to know that nothing would be neglected, that a capable head and clever hands were again in charge.

Jim went back to Oxford; the boys became more or less reconciled to school. Mr. Laidlaw settled down to the long winter's work, while Eliza and her mother became immersed in a Sale of Work which was to take place at Christmas.

Mrs. Laidlaw was determined that no effort should be spared to make this function a brilliant success. "We must all work our hardest," she said, "and beg right and left, and

it's most important to have a good person to open it, some one who will be a draw."

"Who would 'draw'?" Eliza asked.

"Oh, somebody a little out of the ordinary, I mean, not one of the almost professional openers that every one knows and no one wants to listen to—somebody people would be glad to look at."

"J. M. Barrie or Harry Lauder?"

"Well, of course, that's absurd; there would be no chance of getting either. But that's what I mean . . . can't you think of any one interesting who might be persuaded?"

"So long," said her husband, "as you don't ask me to make the request, I'll think on half a dozen, but your letter will simply flutter sadly into the wastepaper basket."

Mrs. Laidlaw nodded resignedly. "Oh, I know, writing's no use ; you've simply got to go and sit till they say Yes. In Glasgow there is nobody in the least notorious who is interested in church work. Is there any one in Edinburgh? Won't you try some one when you are through at Committees?"

"That I will not. I was ordained to preach the Gospel, not to stand on people's doorsteps begging them to open Sales of Work."

His wife clucked with her tongue impatiently. "But that's where you're wrong, Walter. I wish you'd understand that preaching is of little account now compared with organization. Look at Mr. Stit!"

"I won't. I refuse to."

"Then Martyrs' will sink and sink. It isn't fair not to back up the young people in their efforts. Some of them came to me last night and said they wanted to hear the new men

with a name who had come to the city—and how can that be managed if you don't go and call on them and put the matter before them? Tell them it is a central charge, struggling, and what a favour it would be."

Walter Laidlaw groaned and then he laughed. "Oh well, well—but I'll do them all in one afternoon, and if they decline, I won't beg. I'll just come away at once."

"You're like a child, Walter," his wife said patiently. "Any one would think it was for my benefit, whereas— But we haven't thought of an opener yet. There's such a fatal glibness about most public men, and they're so dull, poor souls, that nobody would go a yard to hear them. I'd rather have a woman: you can always look at her clothes, and she doesn't, as a rule, speak long. Can't you think of any women who are in the public eye?"

"Only murderers," said Mr. Laidlaw gloomily.

"Tuts!" His wife was in no mood for trifling. "We must get it settled, for December will soon be here, and I want to get it thoroughly well advertised through the congregation. I'm going to ask each of them to bring at least one friend, and we must get handbills printed. Walter, I do think you should make a real effort this winter to get the Free Will Offering started. Now that Mr. Mathieson is dead I don't think there's anybody in the Session would oppose it; he only did it, good man, because he distrusted new ways."

"Oh well—we'll see. But I must go now."

But his wife was insistent.

"Go and see George Thomson about it. He is good at keeping at things till he gets them done."

"George Thomson," said Mr. Laidlaw, "is like the ancient Athenians."

"Then I wish we had more of the same kind," said his wife briskly. "I think you should go and see him this very afternoon."

"Oh, woman—"

"Yes, but we want the people in good heart for the winter's work. I neglected them so shamefully in my illness that I must do all I can. And this Free Will Offering seems a good scheme; it works well, I hear, and it would help you, for you hate asking for money."

"Mother," said Eliza, "would a professor's wife do to open the Sale? I met a Mrs. Ralston at the Neishes', and I believe she might do it. We talked a good deal, and she seemed full of interest in everything and told me of all sorts of schemes she had for helping this and that. I've seen her name several times since at Bazaars and things, and she is attractive, and would 'dress the platform,' as the Americans say."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked deeply interested. "Would she come, do you think? Hadn't you better go straight over and see Mrs. Neish about it this afternoon? She would be the best person to ask Mrs. Ralston if she would be so kind. Yes, go now, Eliza—don't lose a minute."

"Whirlwind!" murmured her husband, making his escape from the room, while Eliza, regretting that she had been so precipitate, went upstairs to put on her things.

She found her friend at home and bashfully made her request, struck suddenly in the middle of making it by the horrid thought that Mary Neish might justly wonder why she herself was not being asked, a thought which made her stammer and murmur vaguely that a professor's wife was peculiarly suitable because a professor's was such a

respectable job . . .

There was an amused gleam in Mary Neish's eyes, but she was most sympathetic and helpful.

"Let's see," she said, "if we can't get Mrs. Ralston on the telephone now and get it settled right away."

And in a matter of a very few minutes it was settled, and Eliza breathed a long sigh of relief.

"You always smooth things," she said, looking gratefully at her friend. "I often wonder why you bother with us. You have so many friends and so many interests, and your life is just as full as it can be, and yet you make room for me—not only me but the whole Laidlaw family."

"Yes. I must be a very unselfish creature."

"Now you're mocking, but I'm speaking truly. You've put all the scarlet bits in my life—No, don't laugh; you know what I mean. Jimmie says so too; and oh, Mary, I'm perhaps, *probably*, going to Oxford in February! Isn't it glorious?"

Mary Neish looked as pleased as if some great good had come to herself. She knelt down and laid her hands on Eliza's. "My dear, I *am* glad. It *is* exciting. Your first journey—your trial trip, so to speak. I think I envy you. When you get this Sale of Work over, we must think of clothes . . ."

"Oh, this awful Sale!" Eliza groaned. "Mother is an absolute little whirlwind, sweeping us away in her track. Did you ever know any one like Mother?"

" Never! That's why I'm so thankful for her . . . I must get some French pottery for her stall. It generally sells well."

"That would please her frightfully. She has knitted seventy pairs of boys' stockings, and Rob is making writing-

boards (he has neat hands), and Geordie is messing away at something, and I'm making cushions, for they make a good appearance—"

The days sped quickly, cold, damp, foggy days, but that did not matter to Mrs. Laidlaw, deep in her schemes. Her husband told her he feared that there was nothing to which she would not stoop to bring in funds, but she cared little for taunts as she went on her way inspiring every one with whom she came in contact with something of her own enthusiasm.

Eliza watched her mother with a sort of amused admiration, wondering a little that she should take so much trouble, surprised that she considered it worth while, but she admitted to herself that there was a certain amount of pleasure to be got out of it. It was interesting to see the people bring their work. Mrs. Laidlaw never failed for words, and every fresh contribution that came in was received with as much enthusiasm as the first.

The spare bedroom was heaped with things. Clothes-horses were brought up from the laundry the better to display embroidered tablecloths and lace-edged towels, and cushions lay piled on the bed. China was ranged on tables; there were boxes and boxes of baby things. Every one who came was taken up to see the display and then regaled with tea in the drawing-room.

"My, it's just like wedding presents," said one woman. "You'll need to hurry up, Miss Eliza, and yours'll be the next show. Oh, I say, look at that bedspread! What a pity we can't raffle. Nobody'll give a decent price for it. Aw, and the wee tray with the teapot, and cup and saucer, a cosy, and all to match."

"Morning tea," said Mrs. Laidlaw—"for those that indulge in such a luxury."

"Fancy! I like a cup of morning tea myself, but I doubt mine's not as dainty as all that. Surely these are awful big for tea-cosies."

"They are to cover hot-water cans," Eliza explained.

"I see—Fancy! . . . Mrs. Laidlaw, I've been promised a fine contribution of pork sausages for ma stall. Ucha! a gentleman friend of ours in the cooked-meat line. And I wouldn't wonder if he sent us some black and white puddings as well, and mebbe a haggis or two."

There was actual fervour in Mrs. Laidlaw's voice as she said, " *Splendid!* That will be a help."

"Ucha, and I'm making potted-head myself every week and disposing of it among ma friends, in wee bowls, you know . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw left nothing to chance, and spent much time coaching everybody in their parts. Her husband she found difficult.

"No, Walter, you must write your speech and let me see what you mean to say. The few bald sentences that you think sufficient might just ruin the Sale."

"Nonsense, woman!"

"A jovial chairman is a great help. Say something grateful and nice about Mrs. Ralston—you heard what Mrs. Neish said about all the good work she does; and whatever you do don't forget to thank all the workers. They really have been good, and this is a great day for them. Of course you must talk about the object of the Sale, and if you could bring in some neat, telling story or—"

"Neat and telling!" groaned Walter Laidlaw. "When was

I ever either the one or the other? You should have been a showman, Ailie—your instincts all lie that way."

The opening of the Sale was a real triumph. The hall was solid with people. Mrs. Laidlaw, flushed and radiant, and wearing a new hat, felt as if she were walking in one of her own dreams come true. Mrs. Ralston was a charming little figure in a moleskin coat and a rose-coloured hat and frock. She had blue eyes and very white teeth, and when she made a joke she stopped to laugh happily at her own humour. The very sight of her put every one in a good humour, and when she stepped off the platform, which, besides being tastefully decorated with growing plants, was piled with boxes of pork sausages and other edibles, and led the buying, every one followed suit, and before the day was over the boards had been cleared and the goodly sum of £350 had been achieved.

The Laidlaw family, home again in the study at Blinkbonny, exulted together in the success of the venture.

"I was proud of Martyrs' to-day," said Mrs. Laidlaw.

"Why, Mother," said Eliza, "you did it all yourself. What do you suppose would have happened if you had only made a few articles and trusted to luck? No one would have worked. You were the driving power."

"Oh, I don't think so. I could have done little if they hadn't backed me up. I'll never forget the goodness of my friends. *Every one* was there. And the day was fine. And we were all well. When I think of this time last year when I felt such a wreck . . ."

Walter Laidlaw smiled at his wife as he quoted the words of the old psalm:

"My heart inditing is
Good matter in a song . . ."

"We got a fine tea," said Rob; " I wouldn't mind though there was a Sale every Saturday."

"It cost us a pretty penny," Mrs. Laidlaw said, "but nobody will ever realize it."

Her husband laughed. "Practical always, Ailie," he said.

CHAPTER 16

"I, too, have seen Oxford."
Irish Memories.

A VISIT to Oxford had been so often talked about, had hung in the future so like a bright, unapproachable moon, that Eliza had never really believed that anything so wonderful could come to pass. However, before Jim went back after the Christmas vacation he had made his mother promise to bring Eliza to Oxford in February. It would not be so gay, he explained, as the summer term, but he thought his mother would prefer it, and Eliza would see the O.U.D.S. performance.

"I like the spring term myself," he said. "I'll take rooms at the Mitre for four days, that's about all the time I can spare for showing you round. Meade and Ewan Cameron will take a hand, I expect. And afterwards you could go on to London, Mother, couldn't you, and see Aunt and Uncle James? They always complain that you never bring Eliza to see them."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked at the plan from every side, talked it over with her husband, counted the cost, hesitated, then, thinking of Eliza's delight, finally decided to accept her son's invitation.

"One week," she said, "Surely things can't go very wrong in a week. Mary will do her best, I know, but she can't be expected to do everything; if things get a little bit overgone we'll begin the spring cleaning all the earlier. And you two boys must give me your word of honour to behave."

Rob and Geordie grinned broadly, in no way abashed that such a thing should be considered necessary.

"What about our clothes? " Eliza asked, almost awed by this coming true of a dream.

"Clothes!" said Mrs. Laidlaw vaguely. "Surely we've great abundance—"

Eliza looked at her mother and said in an exasperated voice, "If you had seen what Meta West took to London—the evening dresses! She could have been presented at Court in any one of them."

"Meta West's father is a wealthy man. Poor ministers' daughters aren't likely to be presented at Court."

"No," said Rob, busily engaged on some operation with a corkscrew and a piece of wood, "the only Court Elijah's likely to be presented at is the Police Court."

"*Funny!*" said his sister bitterly. "But, Mother, don't you want to do Jimmie credit?"

"My black coat and skirt is quite good," Mrs. Laidlaw said, "that for travelling and every day, and I have the grey for better occasions; all the black silk for evening needs is a tidy-up. Nobody will look at me, but I'd like you to look nice." She looked meditatively at her daughter. "A new pink evening dress, perhaps. Clothes are cheaper. I saw some things in the *Herald* to-day that seemed wonderfully reasonable—nice-looking clothes."

"Ye-es." Eliza looked doubtful. "But when you go to see them they look so ordinary, and the shop-people immediately show you something much nicer that costs about double."

"Well—we'll see. We'd better go into town tomorrow and have a long afternoon among the shops. We haven't a

great deal of time: Jim says the 9th; that's barely a fortnight. I must write at once to Aunt James. She and Uncle are old and need a lot of preparing. We might stay with them from the Friday till Tuesday, and I daresay we shall be glad enough to get home. Visiting is no better than it is called . . . I'm always so cold in other people's houses, I don't know why it is."

Looking back on that time of preparation Eliza could not think why she had not been thrillingly happy with such a wonderful time in prospect. But then, as she pointed out to herself, she couldn't know that it was going to be such a perfect time; she had been filled with fears and forebodings rather than with rapture; she had hated leaving her father and Rob and Geordie at home.

The morning of departure came and the Central Station was thronged as usual with people intent on business or pleasure. Mrs. Laidlaw and her daughter were comfortably settled in corner seats, quite near the dining-saloon, and not too far from their luggage.

Walter Laidlaw stood at the carriage-door regarding pleasantly the hurrying crowds, and paying but scant attention to the parting injunctions his wife was pouring into his ear. The train began to move. "Walter," she cried, "you won't forget that funeral? And if anything happens you'll wire at once?"

Eliza leaned out and waved until the train swept into a tunnel, and when they emerged into daylight she sat back and tried to realize her sensations. They were really away. Up to the last moment she had expected some one to be stricken down with measles or influenza . . . In the luggage van reposed a small cane-trunk containing what seemed to

Eliza a unique collection of garments. She gave a little gasp of excitement as she thought of them. Packed in folds and folds of whispering white paper was a peach-coloured taffeta dress, full-skirted, with touches of silver lace; a little wisp of a black lace dress with a girdle of bright flowers; and Mary Neish had lent her—oh, wonder! a Chinese embroidered shawl. She had come over with it herself to give the girl a lesson in how to wear it. "No, no, my dear, not that way," she had cried. "That's how the old women used to wear their shawls, when they went to church with a clean handkerchief and a bit of lad's love in their hands. . . . Wear it with an air—like this!" She had given the shawl a swirl, and looked back over her shoulder, a most captivating figure. And Eliza had said rather ruefully, "Yes, but you're you."

Mrs. Laidlaw was already absorbed in the *Glasgow Herald*, but Eliza could not settle to read, so she fell to studying the other occupants of the carriage—a little grizzled man with what she supposed must be his wife and daughter; singularly dull people, she felt, to be taking this golden journey.

The wife had a long pale face and a black dress; round the high neck edged with white frilling hung a pendant with a young man's portrait. ("Her son, killed in the War!" thought Eliza.)

The daughter might have been any age from thirty to fifty, and had a grey, unlovely face.

The little company neither read nor talked. Once, when the little grizzled man coughed, the long-faced woman said, "Give Father a lozenge!" and the daughter complied.

After pondering over them for some time Eliza decided

that they had been called to London to see a near relative who was very ill. That would account for the silence and despondency, and when she and her mother went into the dining-saloon for the first luncheon, and the silent company made no movement, she would fain have asked them how they were going to sustain themselves, and offered to fetch sandwiches.

There was a long afternoon after the early meal. Mrs. Laidlaw slept peacefully, while Eliza watched the telegraph-poles slip past, and stared at the sodden winter landscape. Her book was a long tranquil, domestic story, the kind one can sink into, and she felt as if she had been sitting there from the beginning of time.

Both Eliza and her mother were worried when the silent company did not go for tea, and Mrs. Laidlaw, leaning with her kind smile towards the long-faced woman, tried to engage her in conversation, but with no success.

Eliza, watching her mother's repulse, was inclined to laugh, and turning away met the eyes of the little grizzled man beside her, and found that they were merry. Quite suddenly he began to talk, and Eliza found that her surmises had been entirely wrong. They had been in Glasgow, he told her, for a week, staying with relatives; a farewell visit, for they had sold up their house in Edinburgh and were on their way to North Devon, his native place, to finish their days.

"Been in Edinburgh near thirty years, down Leith Walk way. Don't know if we'd ever have left it, for the boy was learnin' to be a lawyer and would ha' settled there, but off he went to the War—nineteen—and never came back. Well, a cottage in a village ten miles from a station'll be a

bit of a change from Leith Walk—miss the Picture Houses." He cocked a cheerful eye at her. "Fine city, Edinburgh. Modern Athens I've heard it called. Ever been to the Zoo? It's fine. All them animals! I heard tell a seal escaped and got down to the Water o' Leith and was near in the sea when they caught it."

"Oh, the poor seal!" said Eliza. "I wish it had got away!"

"Well, I dunno: they'd paid for it, I suppose—but what I say is how did it get to the water from Murrayfield? Must have climbed walls, that seal must have."

He fell silent, evidently ruminating on the phenomen while his silent wife looked at him as if she were sorry for one so incapable of holding his tongue.

"You live in Glasgow?" he asked in a minute.

"Most of the time," Eliza told him, and added, "we go in summer to the Borders."

He nodded. "I know. Scott's country. Been there myself in a charry. Abbotsford and all that. Read a bit of Scott. *Ivanhoe. Kenilworth.* The Scotch don't seem to care for Sir Walter like they care for Bobbie Burns. My word, them Burns's Suppers! Butcher Brown down Leith Walk was a great lad for them. He made the haggises and spouted yards o' Burns—made you lawff to hear 'im. I never could understand a word o' Burns's poetry, but Sir Walter I do like . . ."

"You will have lots of time for reading now," Eliza told him.

"Hmm! Find it a bit dull in the winter, shouldn't wonder. Oh, I dunno!"

He coughed and his daughter silently handed him a lozenge—then put back her head and closed her eyes.

Eliza looked at her. She had taken off her hat and her hair was quite grey. Eliza wondered if she were glad or sorry to leave Leith Walk. Would she live in this North Devon village with the silent mother and talkative father, year in and year out, getting greyer . . . ?

As Eliza watched her she put up her left hand to her head and on the third finger glittered what was obviously an engagement ring. So! That changed everything, thought Eliza. Perhaps she was only going to settle her parents in their new home, then go back to Edinburgh, or perhaps London, or even over the sea—anyway she must have lots to think of . . . but how odd it seemed to be grey-haired and engaged!

At Rugby they changed for Oxford, and the last part of the journey was slow, with many stops. Not that Eliza minded, staring out into the darkness, watching lights rush up to meet them, then recede, eagerly reading the names of the stations that made her heart beat because they were so different.

Jim was meeting them, and by his somewhat fixed grin Eliza sympathetically realized that he felt he had let himself in for a big thing.

"Hullo, Mother—Hullo, 'Liza! I've a taxi here—where's that porter?"

He hustled them out of the station, paying but impatient heed to his mother's anxiety about the luggage.

"All right, Mother, all right! I'll go back, though the porter's quite capable of finding it alone. There he is, you see. Is that right? Two cases and a hat-box? Now we can get along."

"Dear me, Jimmie," his mother said, "your time is surely

very precious. Need you hustle us like this?

Jim grinned rather shamefacedly. "I'm sorry, Mother, if I've begun badly. I do hope you'll enjoy yourself and that 'Liza'll find Oxford all her fancy painted. Meade's going to help me though, so's old Ewan."

("Help him though!" Eliza stiffened.)

"To-morrow," Jim continued, innocent of offence, "to-morrow you will see the Colleges and lunch with Meade and in the afternoon you're to be taken to Blenheim Park, then tea with Ewan, and the Union at night. The next day you'll be motored all round, and the O.U.D.S. next night. Then—here we are!"

It was wonderful to Eliza to see the casual, offhand way her brother addressed the hall-porter, an awe-inspiring creature.

"I didn't know," said Jim, "whether you'd like dinner—it's pretty late—or a light supper."

"We need nothing," said his mother, "but a cup of weak tea and a biscuit. We had an excellent midday meal on the train."

Jim waited until he had seen them comfortably settled, and then announced that he must go back to work.

"You'll be all right, will you? I got a big room with two beds; I knew you'd like to be together, and I told them to have a good fire. I'll be along about 10.30 tomorrow morning. There's a drawing-room upstairs where you can see all the papers. Well!" he laid his hand for a second on his mother's shoulder and grinned at his sister, "good-night."

"He's right to go back to his work," said Mrs. Laidlaw.

"He's glad to get away from us," said Eliza. "I didn't

realize that a man who has his people up is an object of pity, and his friends stand round to help him out. Jim just seemed about the age of Geordie to-night; he was quite shy, and it was very like him to tell us at the very start all the outings he had arranged for us. You know how he always tells us, the first moment he arrives, about the presents he has brought for us—poor old Jimmie!"

It seemed great luxury to the mother and daughter to sit by their bedroom fire and feel that there was nothing they ought to be doing, to undress leisurely and read in bed. Eliza's thoughts were on the morrow, but as Mrs. Laidlaw finished her evening chapter she sighed and said, "I wonder what they're doing at home tonight! I do hope the boys haven't worried Mary by setting the house on fire, and that your father remembered the funeral. This looks to me a well-kept room. The great advantage about a hotel is that you can eat your food in peace without making exaggerated statements about the excellence of everything"—she yawned . . . "and go to bed when you want to, instead of sitting up trying to make conversation. D'you want to read, Eliza, or shall I put out the lights?"

Pale February sunshine greeted them when they entered the coffee-room next morning, spring flowers adorned the round tables with their crisp white cloths, the pleasant morning smell of coffee and fried bacon filled the air.

"I do like a room on a street," Eliza said, watching the passers-by. "Look at the baker's boy with the loaves. They're different from ours—crusty all over." She joined her mother. "A table by the fire, pink hyacinths; sausages and bacon, my favourite breakfast. Isn't this jolly, Mother?"

"Yes—if we knew they were all happy at home. I'll write

at once and post it when we go out, and I'll need to get several dozens of postcards. I've promised them to so many people."

Jim was punctual, but found his mother and sister dressed ready for him, Eliza in a rust-red coat, fur-trimmed, and a hat of the same warm shade.

"We'd better look first at the colleges," Jim said as they set off.

"That will be nice," his mother agreed, but as a matter of fact it was not very nice, for Jim made a poor cicerone. He whisked them round from one building to another, giving them no time to see anything, dragged them up and down numberless steps, walked rapidly to the river and back, and finally landed them among the shops.

Then Mrs. Laidlaw rebelled, and would not be hustled any more. The shops interested her much more than the colleges, and before a Domestic Bazaar she took her stand and refused to budge.

Jim remonstrated. "Surely you don't want to buy china in Oxford?"

"Yes, indeed I do. I've a passion for cheap china shops. I *must* go in, Eliza. See, there is a coffee-cup that will go beautifully with your great-grandmother's old Crown Derby set. You remember one was broken, and it was going to be dreadfully expensive to have one made—that is only one and sixpence, the same shape and everything."

Once inside, a dozen things caught her attention, and Eliza had great difficulty in getting her away unaccompanied by a large blue-and-white-checked jug, " so beautifully wide to wash."

Gerald Meade had made every effort to do honour to his

guests. He had ordered a variety of pot-plants and cut flowers which his scout had had some difficulty in finding room for, and a luncheon which he thought would appeal to Eliza.

That young woman had meant to be rather cold to her host—Jim's remark about him "giving a hand" still rankled—but he was so eager to please, so anxious to amuse and interest his guests, that she had to unbend.

Mrs. Laidlaw was unfeignedly glad to see Gerald. She had taken a genuine liking to him at Corhope, admired his irresponsible chatter and laughing face, and enjoyed being chaffed by him.

"It isn't every one," she remarked, "who would trouble to amuse an elderly woman."

"Elderly!" scoffed her son. "My dear Mother, you never will be elderly. I can't see you ever settling down to be an old lady. At ninety, I expect, you will be hoppiting about carrying comforts to old things of seventy, and offering to guide their decrepit footsteps for a walk—"

After luncheon Gerald announced he would drive them out to Woodstock.

"You must see Blenheim Park," he said.

"But we're taking up your time," Mrs. Laidlaw protested. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"Working?" Gerald echoed airily, "oh, Lord, no! Jim is one of the world's workers, if you like. He'll get his First, but a modest Third will satisfy me—if I get that."

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head at him. "You're losing your opportunities, Gerald. I'm afraid you will regret it."

Gerald grinned at her cheerfully.

"Oh, I'll regret it all right, so let's enjoy the moment. The

sun's coming out, I'll rush round and get the car—Miss Lisa, would you mind carting away these chocolates? I hope they're the kind you like?"

He pushed an enormous be-ribboned box into Eliza's hands and left the room.

Mrs. Laidlaw sighed. "A good-hearted boy," she said. "It's a pity he hasn't more sense."

When they got back to the Mitre for tea and a rest, Mrs. Laidlaw sank into a chair by her bedroom fire owing to complete exhaustion.

"Get me my soft slippers, Eliza, and we'll ask them to bring tea to us here. It's hard work enjoying oneself. Never again shall I go out sight-seeing in new shoes. The stairs of those colleges and towers and things! And how many miles it was round that lake I know not."

"But it was lovely, Mother!"

"Oh, lovely, yes, but why couldn't we have motored round?"

"I suppose," said Eliza, "because it was a nice day for a walk. I enjoyed it."

"You and Gerald walked so fast, and Jimmie was always a few yards in front of me, which made me feel like a gangrel body. Dear me, how delightful it is to get in to a fire and tea and away from the necessity of talking. It would have been nice to have remained in to-night. I'm afraid I'll kick off my slippers at dinner, for I don't know when I had such tired feet . . . What are you wearing to-night?"

"My black dress," Eliza said promptly. "The dinner is in Jim's rooms and there are two frightfully clever men coming. They speak a lot at the Union—probably prime ministers of the future. And Ewan is to be there too."

The dinner in question turned out rather a constrained meal, for Eliza, awed by her company, was almost speechless, and Mrs. Laidlaw, who, if left to herself, was capable of carrying on a conversation with any one, was afraid of saying the wrong thing, and talked rather stiltedly of what she knew little about. When one of the youths asked Eliza's opinion of modern drama, that poor child, blushing deeply, had to confess that never in her life had she entered a theatre, an answer which, after a solemnized "By Jove," reduced the youth to complete silence.

Later, discussing the evening with her mother, Eliza said, "Those were terrifying young men, and I didn't think they spoke so very well at the Union; did you? I thought Ewan spoke much better than they did."

"Oh, poor souls," said Mrs. Laidlaw. "They've a long way to go before they're fit to become prime ministers. They may be all Jimmie says, but I much prefer Ewan Cameron and Gerald Meade. Anyway, they are willing to laugh. Oh, what a blessed thing a bed is! D'you see my book anywhere? Thank you—we mustn't read long, it's after eleven. I hope they are all safely asleep at home."

The next morning they went for a long run with Gerald Meade through Old Marston, up Elsfield Hill to the wide tableland with its far view, through villages and little stone towns untouched and unspoiled by the march of time, and back to the Mitre to luncheon.

"I had no idea England was so beautiful," Eliza said, as she ate, thoughtfully, some apple-tart.

"What did you think it was like?" Gerald asked, and Jim answered for his sister—

"A flat place, rather damp, with Oxford in the middle,

like a birthday cake on a tablecloth."

"Something like that," Eliza nodded, "but it's all different. Oxford is different, quite as beautiful as I expected—more beautiful, even—but different. And the countryside . . . the wideness, it takes one's breath. That little town we saw to-day—Brill, was it?—set up on the hill with the downs billowing round it. I'd love to live in one of these houses in the quiet wide street."

"Too far out of the world," said Jim. "I know the very house, 'Liza, for you and me. I meant to point it out to you to-day. Past Old Marston, on the top of the hill, its back to the village street. The front door opens straight into a black and white hall. One part is any old age you like, but most of it is fairly modern. The library, lined with books from floor to ceiling, has three long windows which look over the sloping lawns and the meadows and the river, straight across to the Cotswolds, about forty miles—the jolliest place ever you saw. That must be one of the houses we acquire when we're rich, old 'Liza."

Eliza nodded happily. "We must have one in England," she said.

"Personally," said Gerald, "I prefer Corhope to anything—What do you say, Mrs. Laidlaw?"

Mrs. Laidlaw finished her apple-tart, laid down her fork and spoon, and said with a sigh, "The worst thing to me about England is the want of cream: the nicest pudding is nothing without it . . . I'm glad you like Corhope, Gerald. You must come again next summer. Rob and Geordie are looking forward eagerly to your coming."

"Tell them I'm counting the hours till next August. I do wish my mother had been at home, and perhaps you could

have spared a few days to visit her at King John's Lodge. Unfortunately she's in Italy till March, but the next time you're in London . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head. "But I don't make a habit of being in London. This is my second visit in the fifty years I've lived, and it's very likely to be my last."

Jim laughed. "You're so desperately final, Mother. I believe there will be no keeping you at home now that you've had a taste of going about."

"The want of money to throw away will keep me at home," said Mrs. Laidlaw, and Eliza, flushing pink, wished—as she had often wished—that her mother would not put things so bluntly. "But I would like to meet your mother," Mrs. Laidlaw went on, looking very kindly at Gerald. "I'm hoping you'll bring her to Corhope next summer . . ."

The next day was the last of their visit. Jim, who had really done his duty nobly, left them after luncheon on the plea of work.

"I'll come back and take you to tea at the Candied Friend," he promised.

"Mr. Meade asked us to go to tea with him," Eliza said, "but Mother thought she would rather have tea here. We were out all morning and she wants to write all afternoon. She kept saying to every one before we left, 'I'll send you a card from Oxford'; she's sent *dozens:* now it's letters. Look at her!"

Jim bent forward and looked over his mother's shoulder.

"Now, Jimmie, don't look—I can't bear it . . ." She put her hand over the sheet.

"Why d'you trouble, Mother? I don't see much fun

sitting there scribbling."

"There's a great pleasure in giving pleasure," his mother said sententiously, still guarding her letter.

Jim groaned. "If you weren't a comic, Mother, you'd be a horrid little prig. Why won't you let me see what you're writing? I'd like to see your description of Oxford . . . No? Well, I'm off to do some work."

Eliza sat still in the drawing-room window after Jim had gone, watching the life of the street. Undergraduates, shop-girls, rather dowdy ladies, crowds of elderly clergymen, people evidently in from the country to shop, with carfuls of jolly children, they passed in one unceasing stream. Presently she turned round and watched her mother. She was absorbed in the letter she was writing, and Eliza was amused to see that she was shaking her head as if impressed by her own eloquence. What could she be saying? Eliza was sure of one thing, her mother was not telling that she had been footsore, and tired, and not a little bored by the sight-seeing. She had forgotten that, but she was recounting all the kindness they had received, the beautiful things they had seen, and, above all, the thoughtful goodness of her eldest son . . . Mrs. Stit would be impressed.

Eliza looked round for her book, remembered she had finished it, and decided that she would go to Jim's rooms and see what he had. Telling her mother that she would be back at half-past four, she buttoned the fur collar of her coat round her throat and went out into the street.

It was delightful to be out alone, free to gaze as long as she pleased at antique shops, to stand in book-shops fingering books, without feeling that any one was standing about, bored, waiting for her.

When, at last, she reached Jim's rooms she found that worthy stretched in a long chair with a pipe and a detective novel. She laughed as he sprang to his feet guiltily.

"I thought you were finding us rather a strain, poor pet. I've come for a book. No, don't trouble, I'll find something. I love to browse, and I've never really seen your room properly because people have always been here."

The brother and sister spent a pleasant half-hour together, then the door opened and Eliza cried, "Why, it's Ewan!—I'm only here for a minute, Ewan. I disturbed Jimmie working—" She indicated the pipe and novel. "Are you going to 'work' too?"

Ewan smiled patiently. He had gentle dark eyes "like a red deer," Geordie always said—and a soft Highland voice.

"I'm going to walk back with you if you'll let me. Are you going now? Let me take the book."

As they walked along the street Eliza, glancing at her companion, thought how good-looking he was compared to most of the men who thronged the street. She had always taken Ewan very much for granted, some one who came and went, almost like another brother, only much more willing to fetch and carry and be at her service. Truth to tell, she rather despised Ewan for his gentleness, his unassertiveness; she liked people to be definite—as Jim was in his way, as Gerald Meade was in a different way.

When they reached the hotel, "Let's walk on a bit," Ewan said. "Oxford is lovely when the sun goes down. Come as far as the bridge at St. Clement's . . ."

There had been a shower and the roofs were glistening in the clear shining after rain. Above Magdalen Tower was a primrose strip of sky; somewhere a church bell was

ringing.

"The trees are budding," Ewan said. "I saw celandines out in St. John's Gardens . . ."

Eliza leaned on the bridge and drank in the beauty.

"I'm glad we came here," she said. "I feel I've caught a glimpse of the real Oxford."

They walked back through the Turl, and "I love this street," Eliza said; "I wish I could have one of those little queer houses and live here always."

Ewan shook his head. "Not always. You want to sandwich this place with Scotland, then you get the best of both . . . Look at those roofs! We had a fall of snow here lately and this street was pure Middle Ages."

Mrs. Laidlaw was waiting, sitting at the drawing-room fire with a table beside her spread elaborately for tea. She shook her head as if amused at the situation.

"The waiter insisted on putting it here, and he's bringing toasted tea-cake and I don't know what else. He put a footstool for my feet and a cushion for my back. Here he is!"

Presently Jim joined them and they laughed like children over their tea.

"Looking forward to the O.U.D.S. to-night, 'Liza?" Jim asked.

She turned a radiant face. "*I should think so.* I can hardly believe that I'm really going to see *Hamlet* acted to-night. I've only seen Shakespeare done at school, when the girls giggled . . . You're coming, Ewan?"

He nodded contentedly. "Dining with you and all! I'm having my innings to-day."

"I don't know whether I'm doing right to go," Mrs.

Laidlaw said. "I wouldn't enter an ordinary theatre, but this is amateur and Shakespeare . . ."

Eliza and Ewan smiled to each other, and Jim said solemnly, "That does make it more respectable."

Eliza never forgot her first play. Over and over again, afterwards, she lived every minute. She had begged that they might go early, assuring Jim, who deprecated hurry, that she would never forgive him if she was not in her place at least five minutes before the curtain rose. Everything was a novelty and a delight—watching the audience assemble, listening to the orchestra, studying the programme. She was determined to sit by her brother. Half the pleasure would be lost if she could not turn and look at him when she pleased. With the first words spoken she was carried away, she lived with the actors. Knowing every word of the play, when the grand speeches came she clutched Jim's arm the better to enjoy them, her eyes full of tears —"so workmanlike the blood and tears were drawn."

Mrs. Laidlaw was not so appreciative. The long speeches wearied her, and she thought Hamlet's language to his mother most unseemly—a discontented, uncomfortable fellow.

"But didn't you love

Absent thee from felicity awhile?"

poor Eliza asked.

"Oh, of course it's very sad and beautiful—but it's only a story." Mrs. Laidlaw clicked off the light with decision.

CHAPTER 17

"Pussie, pussie bawdrons, whaur hae ye been?
I've been in London seeing the Queen."
Nursery Rhyme.

THE thought of London was almost tame after Oxford. In the train the mother and daughter discussed their next visit.

"It can't," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "be nearly as pleasant as our Oxford time. It is so much nicer to live in a hotel than with relatives. With old relatives, especially, you can never relax. I wish, almost, we had been going straight home."

"Do tell me about Uncle James and his wife?" Eliza said. "Why do we call her Aunt James? Hasn't she a name of her own? There's a girl—a niece or something—lives with them. She's called Katie. You know Jim stayed at The Cedars for two nights, and he told me. Why is Uncle James a colonel when he isn't in the army? And why doesn't he live in Scotland instead of Hampstead?"

"Uncle James," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "is my dear mother's youngest brother. He is a colonel because he was in the volunteers or territorials—at least he was never in the army that I know of. He made a lot of money, and he married rather late, and his wife has money too. This girl, Katie, is a grand-niece of Aunt James, whom they have brought up. As for living in Hampstead, I expect they do it because they like it. There were no letters this morning. I do hope they have gone to The Cedars: that would be a nice welcome."

Eliza did not like her first sight of London. Paddington

looked dirty and dingy and smelt of fish—Glasgow Central was a much handsomer station, she thought. They were directing a porter to take their luggage to a taxi when a girl came forward and said shyly—

"Oh—are you Mrs. Laidlaw? I thought you were. I'm Katie Dalrymple. I live with my Aunt and Uncle James at The Cedars."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked at the kind round face and liked the girl on the spot.

"How kind of you to come! We didn't expect to be met. Eliza—"

The two girls shook hands, and Kate said, "The car is waiting. May I take your coat, Mrs. Laidlaw? It's a frightfully long platform."

She conducted them to where a comfortable landaulette waited, in charge of a most solidly respectable chauffeur. "He was Uncle's coachman for thirty years," Kate explained, "and he still treats the car as if it were a horse, holds it in, and encourages it on a hill . . . All the servants at The Cedars have been there from time immemorial. The parlour-maid is seventy, and I tremble to see her with the big dishes and covers, for Uncle likes to stick to old-fashioned ways. I tell him it is sheer swank, he knows he carves well, and almost no one does nowadays."

She smiled widely as she gave them this information, showing white, even teeth; then she leant forward and touched Eliza's hand.

"I have so wanted to know you. When your brother came to see us I absolutely tormented him with questions about you, and I've been so excited at the thought of your coming that Aunt said I was fair daft. She has lots of funny

Scots expressions."

"But you're English," said Eliza.

"I'm afraid I am. But though I was born more or less English—I'm partly Scots—and lived in Hampstead all my life, I've been brought up in a thoroughly Scots atmosphere. Uncle and Aunt love England and flatter themselves that they are complete Southerners but they are really utterly Scots. They have not only the speech, but their minds have a Scots accent—you will see. But don't hint it; the darlings would be so hurt . . . And you mustn't mind if they condescend to you a little because you come from Scotland! I think you have never met Aunt and Uncle?"

"I believe," said Eliza, "that they once came to see us—didn't they, Mother?—before I can remember much. But I've written so many letters thanking Uncle for presents that I seem to know him. It used to be the first excitement of Christmas when the Christmas numbers that he sent arrived. The coloured pictures in the *Graphic,* and Santa Claus, and Uncle James are all mixed up in my mind; he must be a kind man."

"The kindest ever," Kate said earnestly. "But rather easily worried. You see, he is old, and he hates being old. Speak very distinctly, for he won't own he is deaf; he says it is the mumbling way young people speak—and don't interrupt him when he tells old stories. I know, of course, you wouldn't, but you mustn't mind my warning you."

"It's very kind of you," Mrs. Laidlaw said. "I've always stood rather in awe of Uncle James, but I've really seen very little of him. We once stayed at The Cedars for a week, my only visit to London—that was about twenty

years ago . . . Elderly people ought to be humoured. I do hope we shan't be a trouble."

"Oh *no.* Both Uncle and Aunt are delighted at the thought of seeing you again. Jim had a great success with them, especially with Aunt; he spoke rather fast for Uncle; and they are looking forward to knowing Eliza . . . Here we are. It isn't such a long way out, is it?"

Eliza and her mother gathered up their belongings, feeling that they would gladly have prolonged the drive and postponed the meeting with their elderly relatives, who sounded, they thought, formidable. As Kate ran up the steps before them, a large elderly parlour-maid opened the door, and there paced into the hall behind her a tall old man and a still taller old woman.

Mrs. Laidlaw felt very small and insignificant as she held up her face like a child to be kissed.

It amazed Eliza that this grand-uncle of hers could be eighty-three and look so young. James Pringle, tall and straight and spare, with abundant white hair and a fresh-coloured face, looked like a man in the prime of life.

"Luncheon, Rowatt," said Mrs. Pringle, and Kate hurried the guests upstairs to two large comfortable bedrooms adjoining each other.

"You can put everything away afterwards. Just wash your hands and come down, will you? I'm so sorry to hustle you like this, but luncheon is already a quarter of an hour late, and things go like clockwork in this house."

She put her head in again to say—

"Would you mind taking off your hats? Uncle doesn't like people staying in the house to wear hats at meals—I'm so sorry."

As they meekly removed their hats the mother and daughter looked at each other, each thinking of the man they had left at home, unruffled Walter Laidlaw, who never tried to impose his will on any one. "And he'd never be a nuisance," thought his wife to herself, "no matter how much over eighty he was!"

They did not put off a second, and were in the dining-room with the last reverberation of the gong.

"Do you mind the fire? No? Then sit here. The two girls will sit on the other side. James—the grace."

A tureen of soup was brought in, and when that was partaken of, the parlour-maid bore in a vast dish with a silver cover containing two fowls, which she placed before her master, and an equally large dish containing a roast leg of mutton was carved by her mistress.

Eliza was given such enormous helpings that she felt she would need no more sustenance that day, but at four o'clock two small tables were brought out in the drawing-room and covered with embroidered tea-cloths. On one was laid a massive silver tray with tea-cups, while the other was covered with hot tea-cake and every known form of eatable. At seven o'clock they descended to a four-course dinner, and at nine o'clock sponge-cakes and Bath Oliver biscuits were brought to the drawing-room and China tea brewed.

Mrs. Laidlaw, who at home was too busy feeding her hungry brood to give much thought to what she ate, frankly enjoyed the good food, but Eliza, with her head full of bells and spires and green lawns and good-looking undergraduates repeating immortal lines, thought both the meals and the relatives a nuisance. She obeyed Kate's

injunction and spoke out clearly, trying to answer intelligently her uncle's questions, but it was not always easy knowing what to say.

He would help himself to salad, remarking—

"You Scots people know nothing of the value of green food. I don't suppose you ever eat salad?"

"Oh, sometimes," Eliza said brightly.

"Umm! Things must have changed since my day . . . I haven't been in Scotland for—let me see—it must be nearly twenty years. Yes, just after the Boer War. I visited then all my old haunts and saw any old friends that were still there, and I wouldn't care to go back. It was always a wretched Liberal place, but things seem to be going from bad to worse. These wild men from the Clyde! I'm ashamed to read the papers. No, I won't go back."

"But"—Eliza stared almost in horror at the old man—"how can you bear not to go back? It's your own country."

"Oh, I've no sentimental nonsense about it; though, of course, I'm not ashamed to acknowledge myself a Scot. There is nothing I enjoy more than the pipes and a good Scots story, but you can enjoy both quite as well in London as in Scotland. I was telling your brother James that when he comes to London he must join the London Scottish. What set the boy on to writing? I never cared much for scribbling. That R. L. Stevenson that they make so much talk about—bless my soul, that was a fellow I never could stand. Ever read any of his books?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"Well, aren't they rubbish?"

Eliza, aware that three pairs of eyes were fixed on her, smiled weakly, and was thankful when the talk turned on

politics. She had been brought up a staunch Tory, but she soon began to feel that a long stay at The Cedars would turn her into a Communist. She had not known how much sympathy she had with discontented workers until she heard them called everything that was idle and worthless and dangerous.

"What do they *want?*" asked James Pringle loudly.

"Well, perhaps they want a measure of comfort," Eliza permitted her glance to stray over the laden table, "and some beauty. Do you know what some of these workmen's houses are like? It's rather funny to hear mine-owners with thousands and thousands a year, and castles up and down the land, and yachts, insisting that the miners are jolly well off with two pounds or so a week. If they had any sense of humour they would hold their peace."

Mrs. Pringle rose majestically, remarking that, in her opinion, politics was not a subject women were fitted to speak on, and led the way to the drawing-room.

Eliza liked her aunt much better than her Uncle James. She had a dry humour that was refreshing.

"Yes," she said, when she had tucked her husband up on the couch in his dressing-room for an afternoon nap, and had arranged herself on a large chintz-covered chair with a red cashmere shawl over her knees and her work on a small table by her side, "yes, when a man gets to be your uncle's age he needs to be humoured."

"A woman too?" Eliza asked.

"In a lesser degree," Mrs. Pringle said with a twinkle. "Women are more accustomed to being set down and kept in their place."

"Oh," said Eliza rather blankly. She looked at her grand-

aunt sitting there, so tall and straight, her abundant hair framing her large placid face, her white, well-kept hands folded serenely in her lap, and thought that she belonged to an age that had passed. We do not produce them now, these old ladies, dignified, calm in the consciousness of their own importance, not striving, but contented, and fearing no ill.

Aunt James had found an excellent audience, and discoursed happily till tea-time on how she managed her house, her servants, her clothes, her charities.

"Yes," she said, "London is a delightful place to live in if you have a good deal of money. I must say I've enjoyed my life, every bit of it. The five-and-forty years at Pettycur—yes, Eliza, I was forty-five when I married your Uncle James. Oh, I know you are thinking that at that age it was hardly worth while marrying at all, but we have had thirty years . . . I was never anxious to be married, for ours was a very happy circle at Pettycur. I sometimes think that if I had had the gift of literary expression I might have made a pleasant quiet book out of our life there, much more entertaining than some that get printed. I often tell Katie my old tales."

"And I love them," Katie said promptly. "One of the nicest was about the girl whose people lost all their money, and who went out to India as a companion to a rich young lady about to be married, and married so well herself that she couldn't know her former patroness."

Aunt James smiled. "That was Millie Moncrieff," she said. "A brat of a girl, but as pretty as a picture. It was a sad business for the Moncrieffs—the oldest family in the district—to lose their money, and in those days girls were

not trained to earn their living. It was thought a fine chance for Millie to go to India with Isa Doig, though it was a case of beggars on horseback with the Doigs. Old Mrs. Doig bleached her clothes on the Pettycur braes with the other village wives; the man was clever, and discovered some sort of dye which made his fortune, but they remained a plain old couple to the end. The son was a climber, and he bought the Moncrieffs' place, Kingshouses, and married an Edinburgh woman, the daughter of a W.S., a grey pinched-looking creature full of silly pride. The daughter had much the same nature, but she had some of old Mrs. Doig's comeliness, and got engaged to a rich business man in Calcutta. Greatly condescending, Mrs. David Doig suggested that Millie might enjoy the voyage—all expenses paid. I was a young girl myself in those days, and I can remember sitting on the bed in Millie's room looking at the things (an aunt had provided a beautiful outfit), and Millie showing me a silk dress with 'panniers,' saying, 'Isa's trousseau! It's not a patch on mine.'

" 'Only yours isn't a trousseau,' I reminded her.

" 'Isn't it? Isn't it? We'll see about that,' cried Millie, and on the long voyage out she won the affection—as we said in our genteel Victorian way—of a man high up in Government service, and when she was married on her arrival in Calcutta her position was so much higher than Isa Doig's that she could have been excused—almost—for not knowing her. How Pettycur laughed! Millie was a minx, but likeable, whereas Isa was both dull and pretentious!"

"Dear me," said Mrs. Laidlaw, knitting busily, "that's a most interesting story. What else happened in Pettycur?"

"Oh, Katie knows them all," said Aunt James.

"Yes," said Katie, counting on her fingers, "there was the tale of the minister's daughter who went off with the circus-rider, and the really pretty one of the music-teacher who married the baronet, and others that I can't remember at the moment."

"I often think," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "that if we were to write down the strange things that have happened in our own experience, people would call them far-fetched, clumsily imagined fiction."

"Yes," Aunt James agreed, smoothing the crimson cashmere on her knees. "Life can be very highly coloured even in its quietest walks. But my own story has been a very placid one. I was my mother's companion for forty years, and very good friends we were. Your Uncle James asked me first when I was twenty-five, and I refused him for some whim or other. I never saw him again till he came back a man over fifty. My mother was sleeping in the churchyard by that time, and I was alone—but not lonely, I've always been too interested in life to be lonely—and when he said, 'Well, Phoebe, you wouldn't take me as a young man, will you take me now?' I just said, 'You will never be old to me, James,' and the thing was settled."

Eliza listened with her chin cupped in her two hands. How quaint it sounded, and sweet like a breath of lavender.

Mrs. Laidlaw nodded, deeply interested, saying, "Uncle James would be a handsome man then."

"He's a handsome man now," said Aunt James, with slight rebuke in her tone, "but then—well, the dogs didn't bark at him, I can assure you."

She smiled to herself reminiscently, and Katie patted her shoulder and said, "They didn't bark at you either, Aunt

Phoebe. I know that, because Aunt Alice told me you were the handsomest woman in the county."

"Tuts, child, perfect nonsense; but we've been very happy. You see, James had always lived in rooms, and he enjoyed having a house of his own and being able to entertain his friends. And I enjoyed it too—for some of them were women who wouldn't have minded being in my place." There was quite a smirk of satisfaction on the old lady's face as she turned to Eliza and said, "Your uncle was quite a lady's man, and was much valued as an escort. I daresay some of them weren't too pleased when I came over the Border, but they were nice to me. I found quite a large circle of friends waiting for me . . . Your uncle bought this house, and I brought my own servants and furniture . . . Oh yes, London is a very pleasant place if you have a good deal of money."

Tea was brought in, and Uncle James came forth from his chamber. Almost immediately, it seemed, it was dinner-time, after which they sat, more or less comatose, while Aunt James read aloud.

Her reading gave Eliza acute pleasure, for she had chosen one of Ian McLaren's most pathetic stories, where every sob and every broken utterance was represented by a dash. Aunt James rendered it literally with curious effect. "I (dash) have come home (dash) . . ." Once Eliza caught her mother's eye, but happily they were able to preserve their gravity.

Mrs. Laidlaw really was enjoying herself immensely. It was all so composed and well ordered and comfortable. She felt like a cat cosily installed before the fire with a saucer of cream, and had lost for the moment her eager, hurried look.

That night as Eliza sat before her mother's fire brushing her hair before going to bed, she said, "D'you like staying here, Mother?"

"I do," said her mother, looking up from her Bible reading. "I like the rest and the comfort. They're a kind couple, Aunt and Uncle. What a blessing they have got Katie to be a comfort to them in their old age. It's amazing how such a young girl—twenty-three, isn't she?—can be so patient and gentle."

Eliza began to plait her rope of hair.

"I don't know how Katie stands it," she said. "The age of every one! They're all nearly done with the things of time—the very chauffeur's about a hundred. And the well-orderedness, and the warmth, and the large meals, and Uncle talking and talking, uncontradicted —such tosh too!"

Mrs. Laidlaw laid down her Bible and looked disapprovingly at her daughter.

"You shouldn't speak like that, Eliza. Your uncle is an old man with a weak heart—who has been made much of all his life."

Eliza gathered up her hair-brushes.

"I like Aunt James," she said; "she's a funny old dear. And Katie reminds me of *The Parson's Daughter.* I adore her little face, but—Good-night, Mother."

CHAPTER 18

"I have no gift at all in shrewishness."
Midsummer Night's Dream.

THE Pringles insisted on their guests staying at least ten days at The Cedars, and they filled the time full of small excitements which delighted Mrs. Laidlaw and—in a lesser degree—her daughter. They were taken to shop at Debenham's and at the Stores; they were motored to Windsor and other places of interest; small luncheon- and dinner-parties were arranged for them, and on Sunday they were taken to the Presbyterian Church in which James Pringle was a leading light.

As was to be expected, Eliza and Katie became bosom friends.

The night before the Laidlaws left for Scotland the two girls sat in Katie's bedroom enjoying a last talk together. Eliza was deeply conscious of the comfort of the room, with its soft carpet and hangings, the bright fire, the toilet-table with its load of tortoise-shell and silver.

"You *have* pretty things," she said, rather enviously.

"Oh, these," said Katie carelessly. "I got them when I was twenty-one, and I've all Mother's ivory things as well, and her jewellery and everything. What's the use of having a lot of things? They're only a nuisance, for I never go away anywhere to stay."

"But why don't you? You must have made lots of friends at that school in Paris."

"Oh yes, but I can't very well go and stay with them, for

how could I ask them back here? Oddly enough, the girls I've kept friends with are rather—well, modern; and just think of uncle's face if a shingled girl smoked a cigarette before him or called him 'old bean'."

Eliza gave a small squeal of pleasure at the thought and said, "It might do him good, don't you think? to see what the girl of the age is really like."

Katie shook her head. "No," she said gravely, "it's *never* good to hurt and shock old people."

"Don't you ever go away at all?" Eliza asked after a minute.

"Only in August, to Hunstanton or Cromer or somewhere, and then it's really the same life that we live here . . . Oh, Lisa, you simply don't know what a joy this visit has been to me. To have some one to talk to . . . When your brother Jim was here I pestered him with questions about you all, and he told me a lot, more perhaps than he knew. It did sound so delightful: how lucky you are to have such a home!"

Eliza looked up quickly; this was an entirely new light on Blinkbonny.

"Lucky?" she said. "Well, I am lucky, I know, to have Father and Mother and Jim and the Bad Ones, but—you've never tried living in Glasgow and being a minister's daughter. I doubt if you'd find it much fun."

"Oh, but I would." Katie gave a jump of delight at the thought. "Imagine having real things to do, and real things to talk about, and real schoolboys tumbling about! It isn't that I'm unhappy at The Cedars—I can never forget that Aunt took me in when I was a troublesome baby whom nobody wanted (my mother was only her niece), and Uncle

James allowed her to do it—but every one is so old, and no one ever laughs out loud or makes a noise, and meals are so important, and opinions are delivered with such a final air . . . I once saw a picture of the Sleeping Beauty's Palace: spiders had spun their webs over the sleepers' faces . . . I sometimes feel those spiders' webs on my own face! I wouldn't grumble if I felt myself of any use to any one, but Aunt and Uncle don't really need me."

"Indeed they do. Why, they both depend on you utterly. Mother and I were just agreeing that you made all the difference in this house. You come in to them with a breath from the outer air, you are their link with the younger generation. It was jolly lucky for Aunt and Uncle to get you. You are too humble, my dear, while I err in the other direction, so they tell me."

Eliza made a face and Katie cried out in denial.

"No, you don't. Besides—it would be absurd for you to be humble; mere affectation." She leant her head against her friend's knees. "Now," she said coaxingly, "tell me all over again about your time at Oxford, and the O.U.D.S., and Mr. Gerald Meade and Mr. Ewan Cameron."

"Oh," said Eliza, rather pink and embarrassed, "you wouldn't see anything out of the way in Gerald Meade. Ewan is Highland, and looks like a poet (which he isn't), and has rather a delicious, soft, slow way of speaking; Gerald is quite ugly and plays Rugger, but—"

"But what?"

"Oh, nothing. I tell you what, you must come to stay with us in the summer at Corhope. It's not much use asking you to Glasgow, it would be poor fun for you watching me trudge up and down to church."

"Anything you do would interest me, Lisa, and I'd love to see Blinkbonny—it's such a nice, funny name for a house."

"It's a ghastly name," said Eliza. "I hate suburban villas."

"What about The Cedars, Hampstead?"

"Oh, that's quite different. All sorts of interesting, even famous people live in Hampstead . . . And I don't say there aren't nice people in Glasgow; there are—heaps. You'd like Mary Neish."

"Isn't she old to be your friend?" Kate asked.

"Oh, you never think about age in connection with Mary. I don't know how old she is—thirty, perhaps—but when she's sixty she'll be just as attractive. You can't think what a darling she is, Katie. She was kind to me one night at a party, when I was young and shy and feeling dreadfully out of it; and she's been a sort of fairy godmother to me ever since! I can't think what it would have been like without her."

"I think," said Katie, "that it's lovely for her having you. Aren't they artists, both she and her husband? It must be fun for the husband and wife to do the same sort of work. Writers, for instance. They would both sit at one big writing-table and tell each other how they were getting on, and how to spell words."

"Yes, but who would look after the house while they both sat working at a big writing-table? I'm afraid the author with an author-wife wouldn't be as well off as one with a Martha-wife, who wouldn't have her mind full of plots and style, but of warm socks and clear fires and good food."

"But they could have a housekeeper to look after all that."

Eliza laughed. "They would need to be better off than most authors before they could afford a good housekeeper."

"Would they? The only author I know is your Jim. I wonder if he will marry an author-wife?"

The notion amused Eliza. "Jimmie can't marry any one for years and years. He's only twenty-three, and he has nothing but what he makes. Besides, I don't believe he'd want to marry. I know he hates to write about young women, and I must say he draws some dreadful sticks. No wonder. You can see him standing a long way from the easel, so to speak, giving a push with the brush, his head half-turned away—dabbing at the portrait like a clucking-hen."

Katie protested. "I don't think his girls are bad, but he never allows them to interfere much in the story. Isn't he writing a long novel now, with a heroine called Selina?"

"Yes." Eliza gave a chuckle. "She is slim and dark with a cropped head, like two girls, sisters, who sometimes stay in Oxford with friends of his, and whom he admires very much. He wants to remodel me on them, but Father won't let me shingle. What beautiful hair you have, Katie."

Katie pulled out a curl and looked down her nose at it.

"It's all I have," she said. "It's funny, but when people remark on a person's hair it generally means that the said person has nothing else worth remarking on!"

"Nonsense, girl. I love your sort of face. It's the sort that never gets haggard. You'll always look pleasant and morning-like, even when you're old. Here, in London, going in and out of shops and places, I've watched all the faces. Some are quite beautiful, some pretty, some

interesting, some raddled and dreadful, but only a very few have what you've got, a good look. Something so sincere and kind looks out of your eyes that I'd speak to you if I were in trouble, whether I knew you or not."

Katie flushed all over her small face. "Oh, Lisa," she said gratefully, "that's a lovely thing to hear. But you're wrong. I'm not in the least good. I've very wicked thoughts. Sometimes I'd like to be a vamp, with green eyes and a snaky way with my legs."

Eliza nodded. "That's the reaction from The Cedars. I feel like that often, as if I must do something gorgeously wicked, melt pearls in wine and send strong men crazy—I know. And then at other times one's mind dwells on *perambulators* or suchlike!"

Katie gave a sigh of delight. "It's such fun, Lisa, the way you talk. I get so tired of sense."

"Then you will enjoy visiting us. We rarely talk sense, except perhaps Mother, and even she enjoys being ridiculous sometimes."

"Oh, your mother! Lisa, you've got a lot of things I'd like, but I envy you most your mother."

Eliza nodded and was silent for a minute looking into the fire. Then a smile turned up the corners of her mouth and she said, "But she is a little worry sometimes. She never takes time to think, and gets herself into the most dreadful muddles. It's her instinct to help every one, but we often tell her it's vicarious kindness, for it takes the whole family to help her out of the situations she creates."

"She's so funny; so gay and sad at the same time! And when she begins to tell stories about people she has known, I'm enthralled." Katie suddenly twisted herself round and,

looking up into her friend's face, said, "Lisa, what do you think of love?"

Eliza appeared both surprised and affronted.

"Love!" she said in a tone of distaste.

"Oh, I don't mean ordinary sort of silly love, flowers and chocolates, and getting engaged because your steps suit, but the love that makes people do tremendous things. Does it exist, d'you think, outside books? Can it happen to ordinary people? . . . You know *Hassan?* That was wonderful, but I don't believe the man thought it worth while. He would have been quite pleased to go back to his garden and the dawn, but the girl was like a flame. I wonder if any one loves like that really?"

"I don't know," said Eliza. "It certainly doesn't look like it. I know heaps of comfortable couples calling each other 'Father' and 'Mother,' and taking their children to the Christmas shows, and to the seaside in summer, but I've never met any of the passionate kind, and I'm quite glad. I'd rather have them in books—they're safer between covers."

"I like the comfortable couples," said Katie. "They're sweet in their very ordinariness . . . Oh, it's all terribly interesting, even to me, and I rarely see a man who isn't at least sixty and fat and bald; and to *you,* Lisa . . . I *shall* be interested in what happens to you!"

"I know what I want," said Eliza, "and that's a great thing. I want everything I can get; quite simply, like that! Mother says happiness only comes through making other people happy; Father says you find your life through losing it; but *I* think one should grab at every single bit of pleasure one can get, and, at least, we've had that if we don't get

anything more. You don't know much about it, Katie, here at The Cedars, but life's pretty awful. I've seen things and heard things that don't bear thinking of. Some people have a ghastly time . . . That's Mother knocking; she thinks we're talking too late. Good-night, my dear."

"And now," said Mrs. Laidlaw, when they had said good-bye to a weeping Katie at Euston, and set their faces to the north, "now that we've finished our pleasant holiday we must work in earnest."

"Oh, *Mother!*" said Eliza.

"Why, I should think after your idle time you would be glad to be busy."

Eliza shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "You're so damping, Mother. When we came home from holidays absolutely sick at the thought of beginning again, you used to say, 'Well, children, it must be hard work now for a long time.' . . . Of course, I know you meant to spur us on, but—"

"My dear, I never managed to spur you on to any purpose," her mother said dryly.

"That's true. I never was any good at school."

"It's odd, for sometimes you sound clever."

"It's only sound," said Eliza, "for I'm not."

"After all," said Mrs. Laidlaw comfortably, "cleverness isn't everything. My great desire always was to be able to stand up and address a great audience, and it's all I can do to stumble out a prayer at a missionary meeting, so I've just had to content myself with my success as a maker of pastry. Where did I put the recipes the cook gave me? You may have the *Times*, I've finished with it. I'll look at the

Morning Post . . . It will be nice to see a Scots paper again. There's no saying how many births and deaths we've missed, and your father will never have given a glance at them."

Eight hours later Blinkbonny received its mistress. Mary-from-Skye was convulsed with laughter, and when questioned as to how she had managed, could only ejaculate, "Ach, not so bad!"

Mrs. Laidlaw's eyes roamed quickly round, noting that the rugs were not straight, that the clock had stopped, that a cushion had come unsewn and was oozing feathers, that the fire had not been properly raked out and was burning drearily, that the plants were crying out for water, that, indeed, the whole room had that appearance of discomfort which seems unavoidable when the mistress has been out of the house for any length of time.

"Well, here we are!" She laid her bag and other impedimenta on a table, and stroked her sons' heads, the nearest they permitted to an embrace, smiling the while at her husband. "How nice and well brushed you both look!"

"Yes," said Geordie with smug complacence, "and we've tidied the room for you; there were a good many things lying about."

"Where did you put them?" Eliza asked.

Rob nodded towards the cupboard. "But don't open the door," he warned them, "it's pretty tight packed."

"It is nice to be home," Mrs. Laidlaw said a little later, as they sat down to supper, "and you have managed well."

"We've got through," said her husband.

"One day," said Rob, "there was something awfully queer about the tea: Father said it tasted like cats. We thought it

might be poisoned, so we watered the aspidistra with it."

"Every Saturday when you were away," said Geordie ("Which was twice," Rob put in), "we went to dinner with Mrs. Learmond. Once we got meringues, and once trifle, and Goodenough gave us toffee to take home with us. Mrs. Hartree had us, but she only gave us ordinary food—chewing-beef; and once we were asked to tea at the Thomsons' and got 'potted head'; and Father read to us every night."

"And is everything right in the church, Walter?" Mrs. Laidlaw asked. "Mr. Reith not worrying? No bad illness?"

"Everything right," the minister said. "I've got a grand text for Sabbath morning, from Ecclesiastes: '*Behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter'.*"

Eliza went up to her room to unpack. There was no fire—no one at Blinkbonny ever had a bedroom fire unless they were too ill to enjoy it—and the gas burned badly. Ugly little room, thought Eliza, ugly furniture, ugly wall-paper, ugly everything.

She sighed as she opened her trunk. On the top lay the peach-coloured taffeta dress. She caught at it and held it to her. It was something pretty in the general drabness. And underneath she came on the O.U.D.S. programme.

It all came back to her, the wonder of it, the beauty of the words, the young grace of the actors. How she had enjoyed it—Oxford and its spires, the green meadows, the river and the bells; the roofs that Ewan said were pure Middle Ages. And now—Blinkbonny.

She groped for something to bring her solace. Jim would be home in another month—Jim and Ewan, and Ewan was now oddly mixed up with the magic of Oxford. He would never be again just the rather dull Ewan that she had liked in a patronizing way.

Meantime, there was the spring cleaning—

CHAPTER 19

"For the grey heid is bendin'
An' the auld shune's needin' mendin' !
But the traiv'lin's near its endin',
And the end's aye the best."

VIOLET JACOB.

ONE March afternoon, a clear cold day with a bitter wind, Mrs. Laidlaw settled herself in her own low chair by the study fire. The room smelt pleasantly of beeswax and turpentine, and she sighed with content as she looked at the shelves of books so straight and upstanding, the worn Indian rugs as clean as Clensel could make them, the shabby but well-polished chairs and writing-table, the bright glass of the pictures.

Mrs. Learmond in her favourite straight-backed chair smiled in sympathy.

"It's over for another year," she said.

"Yes"—Mrs. Laidlaw was rummaging in her enormous mending basket—"and I'm thankful. All the same, I'm not sure that I don't rather enjoy spring cleaning. At least, I certainly don't envy the people who go off to the Riviera or somewhere and come back to find it all done. I'd never be in the least sure that the floors were well scrubbed; and imagine all one's cupboards done by hirelings! Of course, it's just as one has been accustomed—you, for instance, probably never tackled a cupboard in your life—but as long as I have my faculties there are certain things I'll always do myself."

"Last year, Mother," Eliza reminded her, "you had to let me do the cupboards."

Mrs. Laidlaw had begun to mend a cushion cover, but she let her work fall in her lap as she said solemnly—

"Have I not thought of that many a time through this cleaning and thanked God in my heart? No, last year I did no cupboards. I was simply a torment to myself and to every one else. D'you remember the games of Halma to make me sleep? I never thought I'd come to playing Halma through lack of anything better to do!"

"It's very soothing," said Mrs. Learmond, "and remember you were a sick woman and not fit to do anything."

Eliza laughed suddenly, turning to her old friend.

"You remember, Mrs. Learmond, you took mother to stay with you until her room was cleaned, and Mary and I worked so hard and thought we had it absolutely perfect. And when, with pride, Mother, I showed you into your nice fresh bedroom, with everything arranged as I thought you'd like it, all you said was, 'Oh, there's that horrid thermometer. I do think you might have put that out of sight and not have reminded me of my illness.'—It was a blow!"

Mrs. Laidlaw bowed her head as one crying *mea culpa.*

"It was dreadful, but you must remember, as Mrs. Learmond says, that I was a sick woman, and everything was a weariness to me. How grateful I should be that I've taken my full share this year and that every corner is clean; and in a short time everything will be dirty again, and that's a woman's life."

"A useless treadmill," said Eliza.

"Not a bit," said her mother briskly. "What more does a

woman want than a place to keep fresh and clean for her men-folk to come home to?"

"That," said Eliza, "sounds like the beginning of an address to a Mothers' Union: a woman wants a good deal more than that—this woman anyway."

Mrs. Learmond smiled at the mother and daughter—they both amused her—and said, "People are fond of advising me to give up housekeeping and travel about from hotel to hotel."

"Yes, and why don't you?" Eliza asked.

"Because I'd be of all women the most miserable. My household gods mean an absurd lot to me. What would I do in hotel rooms? I don't know what I may be driven to, but as long as I have my old servants to look after me I'll stay settled."

"But you get bronchitis in winter," Eliza reminded her.

"And what would I not get in the South of France, or Egypt, or wherever they want to send me to? Here, if I get bronchitis, I've snug rooms and roaring fires and steam-kettles, and nobody to say I'm a nuisance. Would you have me lie in an hotel—you don't know how cold it can be on the Riviera—with a miserable stove, and draughts galore, and everything grudged to me? Oh dear no, I'll stick to my home comforts . . . By the way, I had two letters this morning that I fear mean changes. One was from the lady whose house I'm in—Miss Turnbull—saying that she would like to return and . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw made an exclamation of disgust.

"Miss Turnbull," she said, "was one of the women who got unstitched in the War. She went off to help in canteens and couldn't settle down again—what a nuisance!"

"And the other," Mrs. Learmond went on, "was from my lawyer saying that the people who have Gowrie are giving it up when the lease is out."

"And does that mean . . . ?"

Mrs. Learmond nodded, and after a minute's silence said—

"I'm an old woman and I don't want to die in a hired house. My place is at Gowrie . . . Glasgow means nothing to me except that it is where the Laidlaws are to be found. And what I am to do without you I know not; I shall be a miserable, lonely woman. I've often laughed at myself staying on in an alien place, but your fireside drew me irresistibly. I tried not to come too often in case of wearying you, but in my heart I knew that you weren't the wearying kind . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw cast her work aside and leant forward in her chair. "Weary of you!" she cried. "Why, if you missed a day Walter would say, 'Surely Mrs. Learmond's deserted us,' and Bob and Geordie would want to rush along and ask if all was well. I put everything away to show you, and we always wondered first what you would think when anything happened. We've no relations in this part of the world and you've meant such a lot to us. This is a great blow."

"It will make a dreadful difference to us," Eliza said; "all the same, I'm glad you're going back to Gowrie. You never were in your proper setting in Pollok Road . . . I love the thought of Gowrie. I picture it like salt air, quiet spaces, wild geese flying towards the sunset. Imagine staying in Glasgow when you have a place like that *Flemington:* waiting for you, a place of your own. Will you invite me to

see it sometime?"

"Here and now," said Mrs. Learmond, "when and for as long as you please." She turned to Mrs. Laidlaw, who had started again, dejectedly, to mend. "It does me good to hear you say that you will miss me, but well I know who will do the real missing. You have so much to do, my dear, so many cares and interests, and Eliza—well, Eliza's life will grow fuller every day; and my bad boys will go to college and probably become mild and dull youths: Jim, now, is almost beyond my ken. But as long as memory lasts I shall think of this study as a haven, and of these evenings as something to be thankful for, and Mr. Laidlaw's words will comfort me as I go down to the River . . . But I'm a ridiculous old woman to start making farewell speeches at this stage of the proceedings. I need Goodenough to tell me some home truths. . . . What were we talking about? Spring cleaning, wasn't it? What are you going to be busy about now?"

"The winter's work will soon be over," Mrs. Laidlaw said. "It's only a case of keeping things going to the finish, and winding them up in a satisfactory style to begin again next winter. The Sabbath School children . . ."

"Yes, Mother," Eliza broke in, "just confess to Mrs. Learmond what you have let me in for."

"Oh, don't say that, Eliza. I'm almost quite guiltless." Mrs. Laidlaw turned to explain to her friend. "Somebody I know, a Miss Bracebrig, has written a sort of small religious play, a musical thing, and is most anxious to get it performed, and she came to me and said Eliza was the only person to do it, and I was sorry for the creature and may have given her a little encouragement; anyway, she went to

Eliza and said I had promised . . ."

"Miss Bracebrig is an impudent woman," said Eliza.

"Oh, poor soul!" said her mother.

"No, she's not in the least a poor soul. She has a fat soul, a complacent, gushing, well-pleased soul, or she would never have intimidated you into getting her horrid production performed. She only wants to get her name into the Missionary Record . . ."

"Is that my charitable daughter speaking?" Mr. Laidlaw said, coming into the room.

Eliza nodded her head defiantly. "It is, and I've still got a lot to say about Miss Bracebrig. How does she expect me to teach the children their parts and have the whole thing ready by Easter? Besides, I doubt if any one will see the point, and they'll be shocked because the Virgin Mary comes in."

Her father turned to Mrs. Learmond. "When first I came to Martyrs', the choir, greatly daring, performed some dreary sort of Cantata, and an old member said to me in hushed tones, 'I hear there's to be a *comedy* in Martyrs' tonight'."

"This will be a comedy," said Eliza, "very tragical mirth. I've been trying to bribe Rob and Geordie to be the Wise Men, and they say they will if they may dress as sheikhs . . . I don't know how sheikhs dress . . ."

"D'you remember," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "when Jimmy was a schoolboy he wrote a play about Persephone, and Rob as Pluto looked like an interesting widow with a black veil over his yellow head . . ."

"By the way, where are Rob and Geordie?" Mr. Laidlaw asked. "I found a policeman at the door with a notebook

demanding to know the names of the boys who lived here. Mary told him the boys hadn't come back from school, but he seemed reluctant to believe it. He says he saw them come in at the garden gate."

"Walter, what can they have been doing now?" Mrs. Laidlaw's voice was distressed.

"Nothing very bad, you may be sure," her husband said easily. "Why, here they are! I thought you hadn't come in, boys. Mary told the policeman so."

"She didn't know," said Rob. "We were in the boot-cupboard."

"Boys," said their mother, "have you no sense of decency? Imagine your father, a minister, having to turn away a policeman from the doorstep! What had you done?"

"Nothing," said Rob with his gentle smile, "but come home from school a new way. We were a bit tired of going a roundabout way by streets, so we took a short cut through backyards and gardens, and the policeman saw us climbing walls and chased us. He must have seen us scoot into our own ash-pit and followed us. When Mary was up answering the bell we got into the boot-cupboard, but she thought she was speaking the truth all right, Father."

"It was fine," said Geordie. " 'bout as good as Doug Fairbanks. That time we got mixed up in the washing when the clothes-line broke and . . ."

"Come away to tea," said Mr. Laidlaw; laying a hand on each of his sons, "and remember, boys, that you're getting too old for senseless pranks. There's a certain fitness in things, and I don't care to parley with the police on my own doorstep." He turned to the guest. "I've got a new tune, Mrs. Learmond, or rather a very old one. I wonder if

you know it. It goes like this . . . I'll try it after tea. Thereare good words, too . . ."

Eliza caught her father's arm. "You haven't heard the dire news! Mrs. Learmond is thinking of going back to Gowrie."

"Leaving us! This is dark news."

"What nonsense," said Mrs. Learmond briskly. "One old woman the less makes very little difference. Let's talk about something else. I'm not away yet. You'll hear plenty about it before I go."

"Anyway," said Eliza, "before you go you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you've seen the worst show in Christendom—that is, if you will honour us with your presence on March 31st at the performance of *The Seeker."*

The play of the so disliked Miss Bracebrig gave Eliza three weeks' hard work. As she had foretold, it was difficult fitting the parts. "Please, ma mother says I'm not to be the Virgin Mary," was the message brought by three likely damsels in succession, but in time difficulties were overcome, half a dozen of the young men and women in the church gave valiant service, costumes were contrived somehow, and the whole effect was rather pleasing. As the Wise Men, Rob and Geordie were the success of the evening. They were armed to the teeth, and spoke in hoarse, threatening voices, and were much applauded. Never had these youths so enjoyed themselves on church premises. Besides playing a part, they were in charge of the "make-up" box, and they stained the entire company such a convincing Eastern bronze that it was almost a week before they regained their natural hue.

CHAPTER 20

". . . Grown-up, yet children in heart, and it was summer—the warm blessed summer."—HANS ANDERSEN.

THE winter's work in the church was finished, the stuff had been bought and cut out ready for the sewing-class in the autumn, each society had arranged its syllabus for the next session, the summer could be enjoyed in peace.

May brought the Assemblies to Edinburgh, and the pheasant-eye lily to the Blinkbonny garden. Then came in the sweet of the year to Walter Laidlaw: the red hawthorn was out, the cherished rockeries were at their best; he mowed the grass, and raked and weeded to his heart's content.

In June Jim came home, finished with Oxford. He and his sister sat in his room, unpacking in the summer twilight.

"How you must have hated leaving," Eliza said.

Jim threw some bundles of socks into a drawer and gave a grunt of profound assent.

"Are you sure these don't want darning? I'd better see . . . Oxford must have been looking its loveliest."

"You can't conceive how lovely. I daresay I'll come across lots of good things in life, but I can't expect anything quite so perfect again as my last summer term at Oxford. It has laid its spell on me for good and all. There are some things you can't forget—the way the sunlight falls through the great chestnut in Exeter gardens, the reaches of the Cherwell on a June afternoon, coming in late after a

gorgeous day to eat bread and cheese and drink ale . . . my word, I wish I were just beginning my three years!"

"But you've had them, Jimmie. Nothing can take their memory from you."

"Some day I'll go back," said Jim, fitting trees into a pair of shoes with immense decision. "I know the house I want—you saw it, 'Liza, with its back to the village street and a glorious view from the front. Just what we like; jostled in pleasant human fashion by neighbours, but our eyes always lifted to the hills! By Jove, wouldn't Father love it! the view of Oxford, Matthew Arnold's tree, and all the rest of it."

Eliza, sitting on the floor, agreed with ecstasy, but added—

"Who lives there now? Would they want to leave it?"

"I don't suppose so," said Jim, "but surely Providence would kill them off for such a good purpose," and they both laughed light-heartedly.

"Oh, Jimmie," Eliza said, "you do change things when you come home."

Jim changed the subject by asking when the family removed to Corhope.

"After the last Sunday, about a week from now . . . Katie is coming to stay with us."

"Is she?" Jim said indifferently.

Eliza was hurt for her friend. "She is so keen about it, Jimmie. You can't think how excited she is. I don't know what she thinks it is going to be like. I tried to warn her that it wouldn't be nearly as comfortable as The Cedars, that it was very plain and bare, but she says that to be with us will be so wonderful. Somehow she seems to think that

we're an interesting family."

"She's wrong there. It would be hard to find a duller lot, take us all round. She's a good little soul, Katie, but almost too affable; she agrees with every word you say."

"I like people to agree with me," Eliza protested. "There's nothing so annoying as to be constantly contradicted and pulled up when you're only speaking for speaking's sake, as Mother would say. I think Katie's a dear."

"Oh, she's all right. 'Liza—I've finished my play."

"Jimmie!"

"I call it *The Catfish.* They're going to try it at a single performance to see if it's any good. Lambert thinks well of it, I'm told, but of course you never can tell . . . And I've sold the serial rights of my new story to *The Argosy*, and with luck I may get American serial rights as well. I can see two years in front of me provided for—that's not bad, is it? And I've saved a bit . . ."

"Jimmie, you *are* wonderful!"

"Not very wonderful. I'm only going to get a second in Greats, I fear. Ewan, good man, is pretty safe for a First."

"But he had an extra year. It makes you all seem so old, this finishing up."

"I am old," said Jim, "nearly twenty-four. Most men leave Oxford at one-and-twenty."

"And I'm twenty," Eliza said ruefully.

"At twenty," said her brother, "you aren't so very old, but at twenty-one you're certainly beginning to go down the hill."

Katie arrived on the first of August. She hurled herself from the train at the junction into the arms of Eliza,

incoherently babbling of her delight, while Jim and a porter vainly tried to learn from her where, in the long London train, her luggage was situated.

Eliza had warned well her family that the expected guest imagined them to be witty and amusing and rather unusual, consequently a gloom prevailed, for the Laidlaws knew their own limitations.

"It was Jimmie," Eliza explained. "Katie saw him first, and he struck too high a note. He seems to have described us so amusingly that Katie thought we were like a family in a book. When she saw mother and me she was prepared to find in us all the properties she had endowed us with in her own mind, and nothing we could say or do would disillusionize her, so, of course, we played up."

"I'm sure I didn't," said Mrs. Laidlaw indignantly.

"Unconsciously you did; it would have been almost impossible not to," her daughter assured her. "It's amazing how you are what people think you are. If you are with some one you know doesn't like you, you are at your worst; with another who imagines you only a little lower than the angels you find yourself full of beautiful thoughts and impulses."

Walter Laidlaw laughed. "What a lot of nonsense you do talk, 'Liza, but there's a grain of wheat among the chaff. It will be very interesting to see what effect for good the high hopes of our visitor will have on our behaviour. I'll have to mend my manners, and look after people's wants at table instead of merely supplying my own. Geordie, as youngest, should remove porridge-plates and be ready to open the dining-room door. Rob is apt to forget he has a hat on his head when he meets ladies . . ."

Rob blushed, and said coldly, "I only lift my hat to magpies, and I wish this beastly girl had stayed in London."

Eliza had sadly to admit to herself that never had her family showed to less advantage than on the first evening of Katie's visit.

The new-comer's obvious desire to be delighted by them seemed to depress each member to the depths.

That Walter Laidlaw was a saint and a scholar had been firmly fixed in Katie's mind, but Eliza felt that her father was not playing his part. Ruddy and weather-beaten, he would talk of nothing but fishing; anything less like a bookish saint it would have been difficult to find. Jim was rather silent; the boys grinned uneasily when addressed, but contributed nothing to the conversation; only Mrs. Laidlaw talked on brightly, asking many questions about The Cedars, about the holiday at Hunstanton, about Uncle's lumbago and Aunt's indigestion, all in the most interested way, But even she rather toppled on her pedestal as the gentle, patient house-mother.

Mrs. Scott made an errand in with some extra thick cream, and said a few words in the mistress's ear, whereupon Mrs. Laidlaw smote both hands on the table and cried despairingly, "Oh, *Moses!* I've forgotten the meat."

"Forgotten the what?" asked Jim, while his father said mildly, "Woman, why call on the name of the great lawgiver?"

Mrs. Laidlaw turned to her daughter. "You were to call for it when you were at the station and I forgot to tell you, and those people coming to lunch to-morrow and nothing in the house!"

"Give them eggs," Jim suggested.

"Kill a fowl," said Eliza.

Geordie turned on her in a blaze of fury. "Murderer! You'll kill no more of my white hens. I've given them all names and they know me."

"Then," said his sister, "you'll have to cycle into Priorsford to-morrow and bring out a heavy damp parcel of meat . . ."

Geordie's retort to this was a hideous grimace, while Rob said, blandly, that if any cycling had to be done he thought Eliza had better do it.

Mrs. Laidlaw had by this time regretted her impetuous outcry. She looked round apologetically and said, "I'm sorry I made a fuss. Somehow, I never seem to learn. And there's nobody to blame but myself."

"We'll take the trap immediately after breakfast," said Eliza.

"Missy's too deliberate." Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head. "It would be eleven before you were back and that's too late."

"Let me bicycle," begged Katie.

"Is it likely?@ said Eliza. "Mother, can't we manage? There's lots of cold meat and eggs—the Forbes won't mind, they've nothing gluttonous about them; and the meat can be fetched at leisure."

"Oh, I daresay . . ." said Mrs. Laidlaw.

Almost from the beginning Rob and Geordie acknowledged to each other that Katie was a real acquisition. Not only was she a grateful and appreciative guest, but blessings seemed to flow from her. When she stayed in the house, manna dropped from the sky. Almost every day the postman on his bicycle unearthed from his bag packages—chocolates such as they had never seen, biscuits in rich

variety, cakes of amazing goodness thick with almond icing. To drive Katie to the market town was a rare treat, for she was interested in all the shops that interested them, and did not care how long she stood gazing at fishing-tackle. And when tea-time approached it was no casual cup that satisfied her, she insisted on going to the best hotel, and there in the dining-room that so pleasantly looked on Tweed, and had a musicians' gallery at one end, they partook of Welsh rabbit and cookies and cakes. Nor did she disdain ices from the hands of the Italian lady, in a shop gaudily decorated and known locally as the Cafe—pronounced to rhyme with safe.

Katie herself was lyrical to Eliza about these expeditions. "The joy of being received on terms of equality! I've always adored boys from a respectful distance, but never imagined myself actually being friends with them."

"You're far too good to them," Eliza told her.

"As if any one could be! To-day I gave them each half a crown to spend. Rob went at once to buy flies, but Geordie came with me to a bookseller's. Did you ever notice Geordie in a book-shop? A bee in a flower garden. He bought Shelley's love poems—remember you mustn't tell this to any one—and when he saw my surprise he said gruffly, 'It'll help me with my play.' It seems the title of it is—no, don't laugh—*When Roses Bloom.* (Can you imagine Geordie sentimental?) He has finished one, he tells me, called *Four Villains Foiled.* I proposed that we should act it, but he said, crushingly, that it would take four wine-glasses to act it properly. Evidently 'some' play!"

Eliza chuckled. "I wonder what makes our boys write plays. Jimmie's written one, did you know? which perhaps

will be acted. The funny thing is, though Father and Mother abhor the stage they have both a great sense of drama. Hear Father tell a story, or hush the people into a tense silence when he preaches! And as for Mother she is really acting most of the time—little though she realizes it. But Geordie! The lamb!"

"I know. Don't you love his angry little face? I'm convinced that though he goes through life apparently in a passion he is really the gentlest of God's creatures."

In the middle of the month Ewan Cameron and Gerald Meade joined the party, and those August days were written on Katie's memory in letters of gold.

They were fortunate for weather. The sun shone benignly. Now and again a soft grey day dawned which was as lovely in its own way as the clear shining. Every day had its special ploy. Gerald Meade's car was the greatest help, for he cared not at all how many were packed into it, and he took it light-heartedly over the worst roads, and sometimes over no roads at all.

Katie liked Gerald. As she said to Eliza in one of their endless talks, "He's rather like something out of P. G. Wodehouse, and he's frightfully good-natured and kind, but of course he's never had reason to be anything else. So far, he seems to have had a very fur-lined existence. Too young for the War, missing even the training . . . I never saw anything quite so young as Gerald Meade, except perhaps you, Lisa; you're of the morning too. I'm only two years older, but I feel like a mother to you."

What Katie thought of Ewan Cameron she never said. She had made up her mind from the first that he was Eliza's slave, and she was almost painfully anxious that Eliza

should be kind.

Life was gay to the whole party during those August days. They climbed hills, and fished and walked and picnicked. Sometimes, protesting, they dressed themselves in respectable garments and went out to luncheon parties, and played tennis with neighbours, but were always thankful to get back to the freedom of Corhope.

Best of all, perhaps, they enjoyed the evenings: to come down changed and refreshed after a long day on the hills to a hilarious supper, then to gather in the living-room round a blazing wood fire—for it is never warm after sunset in these uplands—and invent ridiculous games, or sing, or tell old tales and laugh. Walter Laidlaw, sitting one evening on the sill of the wide-open window, watching the great orange moon rise above the Lammerlaw and enjoying the mingled scent of moorlands and wood-smoke and dew-drenched flowers, turned round to study the scene in the room behind him.

The lamplight and firelight made a soft glow in which the girls' hair shone. Mrs. Laidlaw sat doucely sewing with her work-basket beside her, Rob and Geordie lay on the hearthrug applauding Gerald Meade, who, at the piano, in crazy mood, chanted nonsense.

"Ewan," cried Eliza with her fingers in her ears, "start *Willie brew'd a peck o' maut.* That'll silence him."

Obediently Ewan began:

> "Oh, Willie brew'd a peck o' maut
> An' Rab an' Allan cam to pree:
> Three blither hearts the lee-lang night
> Ye wad na find in Christendie."

The young voices rose in vigorous chorus:

"We are na fou, we're nae that fou . . ."

until Mrs. Laidlaw protested that it was most unseemly.

"Walter," she cried, "you surely can't think it right that they should sing that drinking song?"

"*We are na fou, we're nae that fou,"* again the chorus rose, this time in laughing defiance, and Walter Laidlaw left the window and, joining the circle round the fire, looked smilingly down at his wife.

"They're so realistic," she complained.

"It's only the wine of youth, Ailie. And there's nobody to be contaminated but Mrs. Scott and Watty, and they'll take no ill."

Mrs. Laidlaw held up a needle to the light, and remarked that such songs led young people to think lightly of sin.

"*Bowff*," said Geordie in his mother's ear loudly and irreverently, while Walter Laidlaw, shaking his head in rebuke, asked him to bring *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* from the bookshelf.

"I'll read you *The Long Pack*," he said. "That will silence you."

CHAPTER 21

"O years ayont, O years awa',
My lads, ye'll mind whate'er befa'—"
R. L. S.

"WELL, it'll be porridge and old clothes now for a while," Mrs. Laidlaw remarked on their last night at Corhope.

The minister had already gone back; everything was packed except what would have to be crushed in next morning; the rooms had a stiff, clean, mournful look, and the Laidlaws and Katie Dalrymple were eating their supper rather dejectedly.

"You're always so cheering, Mother," Eliza said. "We don't need to have it rubbed in that the holidays are over."

"Are we to pick up salt with our fingers?" Jim asked. "It's a funny idea to pack the salt-spoons."

"Oh, they must have been put away in the silver-box," Eliza said. "But there are glass ones somewhere . . . I'm sorry, Katie; it's very sordid."

"What," said Katie, "does anything matter except that we have to leave Corhope to-morrow?"

"Anyway," Geordie said, "it's a good thing you're coming to Glasgow with us—you'll see the ship Jimmie made me, and . . ."

"She'll see much more than that," said Eliza; "she will see that desirable villa-residence Blinkbonny, and all the best shops and some of the people . . . Oh, Katie, you and Jimmie have nothing to grouse about, you are both going to London. What would I not give to be you?"

"I'd rather a lot be going back to Oxford," Jim said; "but London's next best, I suppose."

His mother looked anxiously at him as she said, "You've chosen a precarious livelihood. Writing I'm never sure about. Any day you might find that you'd lost the knack . . . But there's just this about it, Jimmie, with your Oxford degree and all your training you could always be a schoolmaster, couldn't you?"

"I could," said Jim solemnly, and added, "You are a daft wee body, aren't you?"

"Well, I can't help having heavy thoughts about you, mixed up with odd people like authors, and people who have to do with the stage."

"You'd rather I'd been a minister."

Mrs. Laidlaw gave a long sigh. "I've no right to repine, but it was never from my side that you got this idea of writing . . . Your father says his mother was a wonderful teller of stories, and he likes to scribble away at verses, and that, perhaps, explains it. It has always seemed strange to me how such a good man as your father could have such a passion for Shakespeare's plays. But there was that Bishop at Oxford who told us that there was nothing he enjoyed so much as going to bed with a detective novel—he would have been better employed reading his Bible, poor sou. . . . Katie, I depend on you going to see these rooms of Jimmie's. Brick Court is such a low name. Tell me if they're decent at all.—Who is the man you share them with, Jimmie?"

"A barrister. A decent little chap—very High Church."

"Well, poor fellow, he might have a worse fault. But, oh, Jimmie, be very careful crossing the streets. I get so nervous

when I think of you at night in that dreadful turmoil. I would study in the evenings, if I were you, and go out as little as possible."

Katie leant forward and laid a comforting hand on that of her hostess. "Dear Mrs. Laidlaw, people in London don't worry about the traffic. The best way is to walk right through it and let things avoid you. Jimmie will be all right."

"I'm sure I hope so, but I feel oddly oppressed to-night. One can't help wondering when we leave Corhope at the end of the summer who will be spared to return."

Eliza, who knew that her mother would be as brisk as possible in the morning, said lightly, "What's the good of worrying? For that matter, the world may end to-night."

"It can't," said Rob. "I read in the *Universe* that it's got millions of years to go yet."

"It's different when you're young," Mrs. Laidlaw went on, "but now your father and I have our faces towards the west . . ."

Jim laughed irreverently as he said, "Neither of you are very far west yet," but his mother refused to be comforted.

"And to go home to no Mrs. Learmond," she lamented.

"Who is Mrs. Learmond?" Katie asked.

"An old lady," said Eliza, "a very old lady, adored by the Laidlaw family."

"She came in practically every day," Mrs. Laidlaw said sadly, "and never once did I say 'Oh bother!' when I saw her—not once. She fitted in so beautifully. She was so wise in experience, and yet she was like a young girl with Eliza, and a boy with Rob and Geordie."

"But couldn't she come and pay you a long visit?" Katie

suggested.

Mrs. Laidlaw shook her head. "You see she is old, and I think she means to settle down at Gowrie for good and all. No, we'll just have to go on our way without her."

"But you must have so many friends," Katie said.

"Far too many," said Eliza gloomily. "Their name is legion." But her mother broke in with—

"Oh, Eliza, as if one could have too many friends! We'll need all we've got before we're done."

"Well, anyway we've too many acquaintances: people who come and take your time (as Sir Walter said) in teaspoonfuls: people who really mean nothing to one: irrelevant people."

"Yes," said her mother; "but if they like coming, why should we grudge the time they take up? The longer I live the clearer I see that the one thing that really matters is that we should be kind one to another."

"Well," said Jim, "that makes life simple. Let's go to bed. This room's like a drunkard's home to-night: the very fire can't be bothered burning . . . I wonder what we'll all be thinking this time next year?"

"Dear knows," said Eliza. "It's queer; you'd think we'd be sure to remember what we're thinking to-night, but long before next year—in a day or two really—we'll have forgotten."

"Anyway," said Katie, "there's one thing I'll never forget, and that is the day you came to The Cedars—it changed life for me."

Mrs. Laidlaw kissed the girl. "Dear Katie, it has been a delight to have you here, and I can say with perfect truth that you haven't been the slightest trouble—and one can't

say that of every guest. And now," with a congratulatory air, "you're going to see Blinkbonny."

"That ghastly name!" groaned Eliza. "Why can't we call it 28 Pollok Road?"

Katie was charmed with the Glasgow house, and with the Glasgow people she met.

"They're so friendly," she cried. "You know them the first minute you meet, and they tell you all about their families and their servants and their illnesses and their gladnesses . . ."

"I'm afraid you're laughing at us," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "but I'm glad you like Glasgow. *I* think there's no place like it."

"Have you met Mr. Stit yet?" Jim asked.

"I don't think so," Katie said. "What is Mr. Stit?"

"I'll tell you what he isn't: he isn't a gentleman and he isn't a Christian—but I daresay he means well."

Walter Laidlaw regarded his son. "Amazing creatures young people," he said pleasantly. "They dispose of a man with a wave of the hand. They say of a justly esteemed writer, 'Quite a decent fellow, but of course he can't *write*,' or of a famous preacher, 'He can organize, but he can't *preach*.' Merciless critics!"

Jim flushed and protested. "But, Father, you wouldn't call Mr. Stit either a Christian or a gentleman? He's a minister, that's about all you can say of him."

"He's a frowst," said Eliza. "D'you remember that time he stayed with us when Mrs. Stit was away? We couldn't get a window opened. He began to cough and say, 'I seem to have got a little cold,' and look significantly at the open window, when we tried to get a breath. And the irony of it

was that he took as his text something about 'Windows open towards Jerusalem.' He took precious good care to have them closed to any other direction."

"Poor soul!" said Mrs. Laidlaw. "I don't like the way you and Jim speak of your elders and betters . . . Isn't it time you and Katie were getting dressed if you're to be at the Neishes' at half-past seven?"

"But, you know, Lisa," Katie said as the two girls dressed together for their dinner-party, "I do think you're rather silly to be discontented about living in Glasgow. The people are such lambs. They're original and full of character: I don't believe I'd ever get tired of them. Why, your Mary Neish, charming as she is, and those professors' wives, are quite ordinary beside them . . . I never want to go back to London. How I would enjoy helping your mother with the sewing-class and all the other things. And I'd learn to make shortbread, and tidy up after Rob and Geordie."

"Yes," Eliza agreed, "you should have been me. What a perfect minister's daughter you would make! But what a wretched substitute I'd be at The Cedars! Uncle would have repeated heart attacks, and Aunt would soon weary of me. I amuse her for a little, but she would miss your loving-kindness: you are patient with old people . . . Katie, don't you ever long to be free?"

Katie shook her head gravely. "It isn't much fun to be free with empty hands. I'm made so that if I can't feel myself of use I'm miserable. If I hadn't Aunt and Uncle I would need to find some one else to take care of."

"You will marry," Eliza told her.

Katie looked dubious. "I doubt it. Probably it would be better if I didn't. I'd ruin a husband with fetching and

carrying for him. I'd disgust every free woman. But *you* will marry, Lisa."

"Shall I? I don't know. I'm not particularly keen to . . . But I want to get everything possible out of life, and I'd feel rather foolish if I went out of it a spinster —You're lucky, Katie, in having money of your own."

Katie smiled rather sadly at her friend.

"And what have you in place of my money? I hate to leave you to-morrow, Lisa, and I don't believe you mind a bit. You will always be the one who permits herself to be loved."

"But isn't that safer?"

Katie made a sound of scorn. "Safer, perhaps, but think what you miss! It's the one who breaks the alabaster box that is the happy one—whether the object is worthy or not. It's horrible to be niggardly about affection."

"I'm frightfully fond of my own people," Eliza said in her own defence.

"That's nothing to your credit—who could help it? You talk of money—why, you're the richest person I know. You have your father and mother, and brothers, and—so much else. What do you want of life, Lisa?"

Eliza looked down into her friend's upturned face and said, "Just about a hundred million things."

"I wish you may get them!" said Katie.

Katie went away the next morning with Jim, and the Laidlaws settled down to the long winter.

"What a blessing!" Mrs. Laidlaw said one evening to her husband as they sat by the fire, "what a blessing that we can start again with a degree of vigour. When we finish off

in spring I always wonder if the workers will turn up again at the beginning of another session, but there they are, all eagerness. It says a good deal for them, but of course they find everything in the church, their social life, as well as the work they do for Christ's sake."

Her husband agreed, and added, "It's a happy little community. I must say we have a remarkably nice lot of young people."

"If only they were more numerous. Mr. Stit tells me he has sixty young communicants. I wish I saw you get such encouragement, Walter."

"I'm perfectly content."

"Too content; you've never striven enough. I don't mean you haven't worked hard, but you don't call attention to yourself. But I might have learned by this time the uselessness of speaking. Twenty-five years and I haven't changed you in the least."

Walter Laidlaw protested. "Haven't I profited a little by your teaching?"

His wife shook her head. "Very little. I think the one thing I've managed to teach you is to turn back the study rug when you go to bed. In everything that matters you have kept to your own way. Well—" she got up and began to put things away for the night. "How the days do fly! It seems only yesterday that we were packing up for Corhope, and before we have time to look round it will be Christmas—and then summer again . . . Winter in Glasgow is rather like a tunnel, don't you think? We crawl through it to the sunshine at the other end—Walter, you're not listening. I don't believe you hear half of what I say . . ."

CHAPTER 22

". . . For your favour, sir, why, give God thanks, . . . and for your writing . . ."—*Much Ado about Nothing.*

MRS. LAIDLAW crawled through her tunnel of winter, finding a good deal of light by the way. Indeed, it was rather an exciting winter for the Laidlaws, for a distant relative died, and left them a silver tea and coffee service. Walter Laidlaw had an article in the *Hibbert Journal*; and Jim's play was produced by the Stage Society, and was so favourably commented on by the Press that there was a hope that it might be tried in London when a theatre could be found for it.

Mrs. Laidlaw was pleased with her legacy (though, as she said, she had no more need of it than a cart for a third wheel); she boasted proudly of her husband's article; but was inclined to be reticent about the play. The circle in which she moved was not very appreciative of plays, and she saw pity rather than envy on the face of Mrs. Stit when the subject was mentioned.

But Eliza was proud if no one else was, and Katie wrote enthusiastic letters, giving every detail of the performance, and repeating every kind thing she had heard said.

Jim came home at Christmas for a week. He was in high spirits, and greatly eased his mother's mind by the description he gave her of his life in London.

"Get it out of your head, Mother, once for all, that people who write spend their time in questionable company drinking cocktails. I'm the virtuous apprentice to the life!

Every Sunday that I'm not at the Temple Church I'm at St. Columba's; I like the service there, it reminds me of Father's."

Also, Jim gave his mother a detailed account of his income and expenditure, and listening, she heaved a relieved sigh.

"It's wonderful," she said, "that you can support yourself in London by your pen—and a manservant! It's odd the respect one has for a man who can make money—like Uncle James at Hampstead with his 'people in a large way'—and yet, in my heart I know that the things you can buy with money are not to be compared to the things you get without money and without price . . . you do believe that, don't you, Jimmie?"

"I do believe it, funny one! You are the comicalest mixture! So keen to impress your neighbours—you remember when I failed to get a prize at school, or Father took the unpopular side in the Presbytery, you said you were shamed in the eyes of your kind? —and yet . . ."

Mrs. Laidlaw sighed and laughed at the same time.

"I'm afraid," she said, "you've got a poor character for a mother. It's one of my besetting sins to care terribly what people think, to want to make a good show in the world. And it isn't as if I didn't know how petty it is, and life is too short to be petty in. Short! Why, here am I a middle-aged woman, almost elderly, and yet my girlhood seems just over my shoulder. Sometimes I feel I could beckon it back, but there is Eliza—yesterday a pretty baby with curls and coral beads—a woman grown, thinking herself far wiser than her mother. Life is queer."

"Life, a Comedy," said Jim. "Isn't there a play called that?

It is queer, as you say. So jolly nice for the few, fairly decent for the many, and for the rest—utterly past talking about. But we're never quite beaten so long as we can laugh. The gods don't really get the better of us."

"The gods! You have a poor pagan way of talking, Jimmie, for your father's son, but I daresay it's only the modern fashion; you like to appear flippant."

When Jim came home at Easter—he could only spare a bare week-end—he had a scheme to propose. Aunt James had invited Eliza to The Cedars for a month, and he thought that when she was in London he might give himself a holiday and take her to Switzerland for a fortnight.

"But can you afford it?" his mother asked anxiously. "You're apt almost to be too generous, Jimmie. That lovely coat you got for me, real skunk collar and cuffs . . . I'm almost afraid to wear it. Do be careful!"

"Oh, I've been prospering lately," Jim assured her. "I've been doing some film work and that pays well. And if my play's anything of a success I should make a bit. It's to be produced in the beginning of May; the rehearsals are going on now."

"It's difficult to know what to wish for it," said Mrs. Laidlaw. "I can't help hoping it will be a success; on the other hand, if it were a failure you might turn to more respectable things."

"*Mother!*" Eliza cried indignantly. "Oh, Jimmie, it's terribly exciting. What are the rehearsals like?"

"Like nothing on earth at present. The whole thing sounds awful tosh, I can hardly bear to listen to it. They tell me it won't be so bad later on, but I don't know. I've

changed so much that I don't know where I am . . ."

"If it should be a success," said Eliza, "would your photograph be in the *Tatler* taking morning-tea in bed, with a frightfully smart dressing-gown, and a telephone at your elbow, you know, like that man, Hilary Bolton?"

"Oh Lord, no," Jim said in great disgust, while his mother added, " I should hope not; I *would* be affronted."

When, in May, the play came out it did not create a sensation, there was no hectic demand for seats, no months of booking in advance, but the critics were kind, the public found it amusing and rather original. People asked each other, "Have you seen *The Catfish?* Oh, *quite* good, you must go," and Jim was assured that it would probably run for two or three months.

When he wrote home that the play really seemed to have caught on, Eliza's delight was boundless, and Mrs. Laidlaw, a little ashamed of her own elation, went out to pay a few calls.

She wore her treasured new coat and a hat with feathers, and she went first to the imposing villa of the Wests. She only called there when she felt rather uplifted, for, though Mrs. West was invariably kind, she suspected Meta of a desire to belittle Eliza.

The drawing-room on this May day was filled with many coloured tulips, and Meta wore a dress of soft blue.

Mrs. Laidlaw thought to herself how well Eliza would have looked in such a dress, and Meta, poor thing, was so sallow that she didn't really become it. She would have been sorrier, she owned to herself, about the lack of looks if Meta had not had such condescending ways.

"Sit here, Mrs. Laidlaw," she said, "in this nice low chair.

It's a comfort to see you sit down for a little, you're such a fly-about." Mrs. West was a stout woman with a large white face. She spoke a great deal in a pronounced Glasgow accent, refusing to be impressed by her daughter's gentility.

"Well, I'm sure it's a treat to see you, Mrs. Laidlaw," she assured her visitor, "and we'll not let you away without your tea, mind that! We'll have it as early as ever you like. Loosen your coat! My! What a lovely coat! A recent purchase?"

"Not a purchase of mine. This isn't the kind of coat I can afford to buy. Jimmie sent it me from London: chose it himself. Look at the lining."

"Lovely," said Mrs. West, and Meta added, "It's rather like one Lady Alice Forbes was wearing yesterday. We're getting up a big Garden Fête, as probably you know, for the Women's Hospital. I'm on the Committee, so of course I see a lot of Lady Alice."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Laidlaw.

Meta prinked out the net collar of her pretty blue dress and continued, "It's wonderful, isn't it, how well we contrive to amuse ourselves in smoky old Glasgow? I can't tell you the number of dances I've had, and now I'm going with a party of friends to Gleneagles. It's lovely; so luxurious; and of course the people who go there are really nice, for the high prices keep away undesirables."

"I see," said Mrs. Laidlaw, while Mrs. West remarked that young people seemed crazy for pleasure nowadays.

"And Jim has written a play!" went on Meta. "I never heard anything so funny. *Your* son, Mrs. Laidlaw! And the papers say it is quite good."

"Oh yes," said Jim's mother airily. "I know nothing about

plays, but he seems to be getting on well. Every profession is so crowded you hardly know what to make of boys. He has rooms in the Temple—a living-room, and two bedrooms, and a tiny kitchen, which he shares with an Oxford friend—a son of Lord Bethune. A very nice, quiet fellow, but High Church. They have a man to look after them and get their breakfast; and they have lunch and dinner out—at their clubs, I suppose. They give tea-parties though."

Meta laughed. "Fancy, Jim! Such a quiet boy, always buried in books! You must give me his address and the next time I'm in London I'll propose myself for tea."

"Impudence!" thought Mrs. Laidlaw, but aloud she said, "I'm sure he would be quite glad to give you tea, and if he knew you were coming he might ask some people to meet you. He seems to know all sorts of people whose names you see in the papers, and Katie says the mirror above his mantelpiece is stuck full of invitations."

"And who is Katie?" Meta asked. "Don't tell me Jim's engaged."

"Oh, dear me, no." Mrs. Laidlaw ruffled at the very suggestion. "I thought you had met Katie. She was with us for several weeks last summer, a particularly nice girl."

"And what has Eliza been doing? I've quite lost touch with her. I seem to have so little time to keep up with old friends."

"Eliza," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "is getting ready to go to London for a long visit. And she and Jim are going to Switzerland." She added, "To climb the Alps," as if some further explanation was required.

"Really! How nice. Is this Eliza's first trip abroad? I'm

afraid I'm getting quite blasé about foreign travel."

"Oh, well, you're a bit older than Eliza. I hope she won't be blasé for a while yet; she's very happy at the thought of going with Jimmie."

"Isn't that nice?" said Mrs. West. "I do like to see a brother and sister fond of each other. Jim and Eliza have always been great friends, it was quite pretty to see them when they were children. You'll miss Eliza, but you've got the wee boys to keep you company . . . Mrs. Laidlaw, you don't know of a good cook? Uch, yes, I'm in trouble again. Both the cook and the table-maid going."

"Poor Mother," said Meta, "is always having trouble with her staff."

"Staff!" ejaculated Mrs. West. "I'd like to turn out the whole pack and keep the house myself with a good general and a woman coming in. I'd be a healthier woman and a much happier one. 'The Staff,' Meta calls them. Broken reeds is a better name in my opinion. Taken singly they're all right, but they *will* quarrel among themselves—Mrs. Laidlaw, you're never going without your tea!"

"I'm afraid I must. I'm going to the Turners'." Mrs. Laidlaw shook hands with her hostess, who said rather wistfully, "Well, this hasn't been much of a visit."

"Come to tea on Tuesday," Mrs. Laidlaw said impulsively, "and we'll have a good long talk."

Mrs. West's face brightened. "I'll look forward to that," she said. "There's no place I enjoy myself so well as Blinkbonny. And if you hear of a cook you'll let me know?"

Mrs. Laidlaw walked slowly along the road feeling vaguely ashamed of herself. She had said nothing that was not strictly true, but she knew in her heart that she had

meant to boast, to pay back Meta for her patronizing tone, and now she regretted it. In her chastened mood she was more than usually grateful for the warmth of the welcome given her by the Turners.

"Well, this is nice! Mother was saying only a minute ago, 'I wish Mrs. Laidlaw would come in and taste the "ragged biscuits" '."

"I had you in my mind when I made them this morning," Miss Bessie said, as she helped to unfasten the guest's coat; then turning to her sister, she said in a stage whisper, "A new coat!"

"So it is," said comfortable Miss Aggie, "and a beauty too. Was it a present, Mrs. Laidlaw?"

"From Jimmie."

"I thought so," laughed Miss Bessie. "I don't see Mrs. Laidlaw spending money on anything for herself." She laid the coat carefully over her arms. "It's just what I'd like for myself—so good, and nothing to soil or spoil. See, Mother, isn't it lovely?" And Mrs. Turner—ninety, but still interested in clothes—admired the garment.

"He was always a nice boy, Jimmie," she said. "I remember how he used always to sit at the foot of the seat and try to keep his brothers in order."

"Oh, but I'm missing my wild boys," said Miss Aggie. "What's come over Rob and Geordie? Their impishness used to be such a delight to me, and now they sit in church like a couple of elders."

"I would have thought you'd be thankful to see an improvement," Mrs. Laidlaw said. "You know people actually left the church because of those boys."

"Then the church was well rid of them," said Miss Aggie

stoutly. "Who minds boys' pranks?"

"I always said, Aggie," her sister put in, "that you were a queer kind of old maid. You like puppies and wild boys and detective stories—But Rob and Geordie are surely a lot quieter?"

"Well, they're getting old."

"Oh, Mrs. Laidlaw, don't say that. Did you hear, Mother? She says Rob and Geordie are getting old."

Mrs. Turner, so nearly at the end of the long road, laughed softly. "Poor wee laddies," she said, "getting old already."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked round the room, and, struck by its peace, said, "I wonder what it is that makes the atmosphere of this house? The very clock has a more contented tick than other clocks; your bulbs don't grow lanky, and straggle; your curtains always look as if they'd just been put up, and Mrs. Turner in her white shawl is a sight to comfort a sad world. All these years in Glasgow this house has been a refuge to me."

"And to how many has Blinkbonny been a refuge?" Miss Aggie asked.

"Oh, Blinkbonny is a *camsteerie,* restless place, with people always coming and going, not like this."

"You prefer a backwater," said Miss Bessie. ". . . And you had Jim for Easter. I thought he and Eliza looked so nice as they came out of church together."

And over the tea and "ragged biscuits" and raspberry jelly, Mrs. Laidlaw told them all about Jim's prospects, and his thoughtfulness to his sister, told it this time without a thought of boasting, with no desire to impress, simply because she knew she was with friends who were glad to be

glad with her.

When she left the Turners she trotted in the direction of home, but as she passed the Stits' gate she hesitated, and then went in. She knew she would probably only hear something to worry her, but there was a sort of painful pleasure to be got from Mr. Stit's large statements, and she really liked Mrs. Stit.

The husband and wife were sitting in the study, a bleak room with a gas fire, light wood furniture, and no curtains at the windows.

Mrs. Laidlaw noticed that Mr. Stit's black coat badly wanted brushing, and that his nails were not too clean. He did not rise when she was shown in.

"Getting ready for the winter's work, you see!" he said, putting an elastic band round a bundle of papers. "Just like the farmers, you know, in one season preparing for another. Oh yes, we expect to do big things next year, big things, new things, bold things."

Mrs. Stit looked proudly at her husband.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she said, her hand at her mouth. "Always bubbling with enthusiasm. At the closing meeting of the Guild they presented him with an umbrella. He well deserved it. Nobody knows how he works."

"Paul plants and Apollos waters—Ah yes," said Mr. Stit. "I'm afraid I must leave you, Mrs. Laidlaw. Your good man well, I hope. That is right . . ."

"Oh, and we've had the girlies for Easter," Mrs. Stit said as her husband left the room. "Yes, all three. Their husbands were all preaching in Glasgow on the Sunday. Wasn't that a beautiful arrangement? My three girlies sitting beside me in church once again. Some one said to

me, 'Mrs. Stit, you must be a proud woman.' I said, 'Oh no, not proud, but thankful, thankful'."

"We had Jimmie," said Mrs. Laidlaw, but she could not help feeling that the remark was something of an anticlimax. A son in London with a manservant paled before three daughters in three different manses.

CHAPTER 23

"If your soul was in my soul's stead."—*The Book of Job.*

IT is fine to be young and good to look at and to have a holiday in prospect, and Eliza sang to herself as she finished one garment after another and laid them away to be packed when the time came. It had been rather an anxiety the question of suitable clothes for a long visit to London, for there was never much of a margin in the Laidlaw budget, but on Eliza's birthday had come a cheque from Mrs. Learmond which changed the face of the globe to that young woman.

"Mother," she said solemnly, "I'll be able to get two new evening dresses as well as other things, and even then there'll be some left over to buy presents for you all . . . Do you suppose Mrs. Learmond realizes in the least what she has done for me?"

Mary Neish came over and advised, and helped and lent things of her own to supply deficiencies, until Eliza felt herself thoroughly well equipped.

It was arranged that she should travel from Glasgow on the Thursday, spend one night in London, and go on the next morning to Switzerland. Jim wrote that Gerald Meade wanted them to dine with him at the Ritz and go to a play, and that Eliza had better stay the night at the Grosvenor.

"The *Ritz!*" said Eliza, awed. "That's where the Queen of Spain stays."

"Ho ho, Elijah!" jeered Geordie.

Her mother protested, "But, Eliza, I can't have you stay

alone in a hotel. Anything might happen. If you don't go out to The Cedars, Jimmie must stay with you at the Grosvenor."

It was Friday and Mrs. Service was at Blinkbonny. She sat sewing, and shaking her head at each item of news told to her. She had not been in good health for a time, and Mrs. Laidlaw, now and again, glanced rather anxiously at her.

"It wouldn't be right," she murmured, "for Miss Eliza to stay alone. Suppose she took ill in the night."

"But I'm not going to be ill through the night," Eliza protested, "and if I were, what could Jimmie do for me, anyway?"

"Dear me," said Mrs. Laidlaw, "that's a danger I hadn't thought of. Suppose you took appendicitis in Paris and had to have a French doctor."

"That would be fun," said Rob. "I don't believe Eliza knows the French for appendicitis."

"I don't," Eliza admitted, "but if I did, it would be no use to me. You need to be in rude health to cope with French."

"There's a lot to be thought of when folk travel," said Mrs. Service. "I never was farther than Skye, but I'll never forget the boat from Mallaig—the fresh herring to breakfast and me so sick-like! I've never been able to endure the smell of herring since . . . Are you a good sailor, Miss Eliza?"

"I've never sailed except to Arran, and given half a chance I was ill, so I don't think I can be much good. But it's only about an hour from Dover to Calais. One hour isn't long to be ill in."

Mrs. Service pulled at a pucker in her seam. "It's a gey while," she sighed.

Eliza looked at her father and they both laughed.

"Determined pessimist," said Walter Laidlaw. "I've crossed the Channel a score of times without being ill."

"Anyway, I'm never train-sick," Eliza said, "so that's something to be thankful for."

"I'd take a drop of brandy," Mrs. Service advised, "and strong smelling-salts, and a hot-water bag, and I'd feel safer about you if I knew you were wearing"—she dropped her voice mysteriously—"a flannel bandage. Ayhe. It keeps off internal chills."

But this was too much for Eliza. The thought of the fragile garments of *crêpe de Chine* which Mary Neish had helped her to make, and which now lay faintly scented in neat piles, in connection with a flannel bandage was merely ludicrous.

"A conversation that began with the Ritz can't end with flannel bandages," she protested, but her mother refused to treat the matter flippantly.

"There's no doubt," she said, "that it's a great risk to go away from home. I'm never really happy about going unless the whole family goes with me, then what happens to one happens to all. I always feel thankful reading about an accident if husband and wife are killed together. How terrible to be the survivor! I doubt if I'd keep sane."

"Mebbe," said Mrs. Service, stitching away, "it would be better if you didn't, but the ways of Providence are past finding out."

"Why worry," Walter Laidlaw asked, "about what will probably never happen? I must be going. I'll walk to Pollokshaws, it's such a lovely evening."

Eliza went out with her father, and the boys vanished on

errands of their own.

"I'm glad," said Mrs. Service, "that Miss Eliza's going to have this fine holiday. I'm sure she'll be much admired in London."

"Oh well—you know, she is to be staying with relations, a very quiet old couple who aren't able to do much entertaining. But Jimmie will do what he can to give her a good time."

"Who is the young gentleman who is giving the dinner?"

"Mr. Meade. You must have heard us speak of him. He stays with us at Corhope. A nice boy."

Mrs. Service looked over her spectacles. "Would he do for Miss Eliza, think ye?"

Mrs. Laidlaw flushed a pretty, girlish pink. She was just going to say that such a thought had never entered her head, but she stopped—was it true? She would hardly have been human if she had not remembered sometimes, when Gerald Meade showed such pleasure at being with them, that he had great possessions, as well as being a young man that any mother might covet as a son-in-law.

She said slowly, "They are good friends, but nothing more. You know, it's never been our way to encourage talk about love-making. I hate the sort of facetiousness some people indulge in."

"You're quite right," Mrs. Service agreed. "It's been the ruin of lots of young people. It was mebbe impertinent in me to mention such a thing, but I've known Miss Eliza all her life . . . Where is yon tall young man that used to come a lot about?"

"Ewan Cameron? He's settled in Oxford. Oh, we could never resent your interest, Mrs. Service, but even to talk

over a young girl's affairs somehow, to me, spoils and vulgarizes . . . I've odd notions, terribly out of date in these days when everything is talked about. And I'm a foolishly anxious mother. You wouldn't believe how I hate letting Eliza away even for a splendid holiday like this. I've a feeling that nothing will be the same again, and I want to keep my girl with me a little longer."

"Ayhe,"—Mrs. Service put her head on one side—"it's not all pleasure being a mother. Many a sore heart goes along with the pride and satisfaction. Of course I don't know from experience—and ye get your sore heart that way too! Sometimes when Robert and I used to be sitting that comfortable together by the fire I'd say, 'Eh, Robert, aren't we well off?' and though he smiled and agreed I knew fine what he was thinkin' . . . Mrs. Laidlaw, in case anything happens to me I'd like Miss Eliza to have the ring Robert gave me. It's real good, and she used to think it awful bonny when she was a bairn, and I aye said it would be hers some day. You are to get my china . . ."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Laidlaw said briskly, " we're not going to talk about anything happening to you. You're quite young still."

Mrs. Service shook her head. "I'm mebbe no that old, but I've turned so *donnert* this while back, I forget everything, so—you'll mind . . ."

The day before Eliza left she and her mother had to attend a wedding. It was no one they knew well, and, to tell the truth, they had not been too pleased about being asked.

As Mrs. Laidlaw forced her hands into tight white gloves

she said, "I can't help being interested in any young couple, but I'm afraid I grudged this present a little. However, I daresay they meant to be kind when they asked us."

"Not they," said Eliza, "they just wanted a crush. And every one'll be so jokesome—"

"Would you have time coming home to see some one?" her father asked. "You know Phemie Brown?"

"Yes, of course I do; the cheery little soul who said, 'I get off awfu' safe'—she's married now, isn't she? The last time I saw her she was full of her new house, and I promised to go and have tea with her. I never saw any one so pleased with life."

Walter Laidlaw shook his head. "Things have darkened for her," he said. "Sam Thomson, the decent fellow she was to have married, is lying hopelessly ill. There will never be a wedding."

Eliza looked aghast. "But how cruel! When poor little Phemie was so happy . . . Do you want me to go and see her to-day? But what could I say?"

"There is nothing to say, but she might talk to you. Her mother complains that she says nothing."

"Oh, very well, I'll go. It is ghastly, Daddy: she was so satisfied."

The wedding reception was as crowded as Eliza had predicted. As she and her mother were borne along on the stream that flowed to the show of presents in the billiard-room, they found themselves beside Mrs. West.

"On your way to see the presents?" she said. "So am I. It's about the only thing that interests me in a wedding . . . What a heat!" They were swept asunder, but presently met

again among the presents. Mrs. West was still very hot.

"It's this dress," she complained. "It was awfully expensive, and I've had so few opportunities to wear it, I thought I'd put it on to-day. But my!" She wiped her face with her handkerchief.

"It's a beautiful dress," said Mrs. Laidlaw consolingly.

"Paris," said Mrs. West, "though there's nothing to show it. To me it looks quite ordinary . . . What d'you think of the presents? The centre table's all silver, the side ones glass and pictures, and there's jewellery on the table in the window. We sent that rose-bowl. I must say it doesn't look the price, but it's solid, of course. It's chagrining to think how much better a show you can make with plate . . . What did you send?"

"A Dresden china figure," said Eliza, "that's it!"

"Fancy! Very nice too. Did you hear what the bridegroom's parents gave? . . . Uch yes, rolling . . . Oh, Mr. Skinner, how d'you do? It's not often I see you wasting your time."

Mrs. West was shaking hands with a sallow-faced young man with a very large button-hole, who looked preternaturally solemn when he replied, "You see, Mrs. West, I'm a friend of the corpse." Mrs. West received this witticism with enthusiasm and enjoined the young man to take care that he wasn't the corpse himself before long, then turned to the Laidlaws, remarking, "Isn't he awful comical? The solemn face he makes before he comes out with a joke! . . . Let's go and get some tea now before the rush begins. Eliza, you're fine and big, you'll do the pushing—"

When they left the house of feasting, Eliza, leaving her

mother to go home alone, took the car to Cook Street and walked from there through side-streets to Phemie Brown's house. Glasgow was rejoicing in the sunshine. Women stood gossiping at close-mouths, and leant out of upper windows; children played in the streets; a canary, hung out in a cage, sang a song of praise; the little greengrocers' shops had bunches of bright flowers in glasses, and displayed tempting rows of gaily-coloured packets of seeds.

To be in sorrow now seemed doubly hard, and Eliza rang the Browns' bell, half hoping that she might not be admitted; but it was Phemie herself, dressed in hat and coat, who opened the door.

"Oh, you're going out! Then I mustn't keep you," Eliza cried in relief.

"Come in, I don't need to go for half an hour yet. It's visiting day at the Infirmary . . ." And Phemie led the way into the room and motioned her visitor to a seat.

Eliza told herself that she would hardly have known the cheerful, bird-like little girl in this unsmiling woman. She laid down the little offering she had brought—a bottle of eau-de-Cologne—and said nervously, "Father thought I might come to see you. I—I'm sorry," then to her own surprise her voice broke and tears filled her eyes.

Phemie looked out to the street. A coal-cart was passing, the man exchanging graceful badinage with his customers; it came distinctly up through the open window.

"Yes," she said dully. "Mr. Laidlaw's been awful good. He goes to see Sam near every day; he's the only one that can help him. Sam's by me now. I don't mean anything to him, hardly; I'm just one of the things he was taken up with when he thought he had his life before him. Like the

house. You never saw anything as neat as the way he'd done up our house—the fitted-in racks that he made himself, all the things to save work; I sometimes told him I'd have a lady's life in such a wee palace. He never mentions the house now . . . This was to have been our marriage day, the 28th. We were going to Arran from to-day till Tuesday. Sam said the woods would be that bonny. He liked that kind of thing, Nature, you know, and to hear the birds sing. I'm not heeding much for it myself, but I didn't care where I went so long as I had Sam."

Eliza clutched her hands tight in her lap, and Phemie went on in the same detached way, as if what she said had no connection with herself.

"It's queer to see him so far away. It's the pain, I think. Pain separates you from everything. I thought he'd have been awful vexed about all the plans being spoiled—mind you, we'd been talking about them for years; we used to go out two or three times a week to Shawlands in the summer and watch our block building, and our name was down for a flat about the very first—but he just whiles says, 'Poor Phemie!' . . . I was going to wear pale grey to-day at my weddin'— it's all there in a pasteboard box under my bed—one of those two-piece suits, with a touch of cerise in my hat, and grey shoes and stockings, but I was going to change into my browns to go to Arran, because we were going to scramble, Sam said, and get high up to see the view."

She rose and began to straighten a photograph on the mantelpiece, and spoke with her back to Eliza.

"The pain's near constant now, and talking troubles him. He tried to tell me something Mr. Laidlaw said to him that

he kind of holds on to. Something about 'Rab' and 'Ailie'."

Eliza nodded. "I know. Dr. John Brown. I'll send it you . . . I ought to go now; I'm hindering you."

Phemie pulled on her gloves. How unlike tragedy she was, with her neat brown frock, and shoes and stockings—what she had meant to wear in Arran with Sam . . .

With a lump in her throat Eliza caught the gloved hands and bent and kissed the little drawn face. "Phemie," she said—"oh, Phemie . . ." then walked quickly out of the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER 24

"Yes, the over-word is plain
If it's trivial, if it's trite—
In the clatter of the train:
'I shall see my love again'."
W. E. HENLEY.

ELIZA left Glasgow next morning in a blaze of sunshine, escorted to the station by both her parents. She had lavishly tipped Rob and Geordie, and at the bookstall she bought a shilling weekly. Her mother shook her head at such reckless extravagance, remarking, "There's just as much reading in the twopenny ones, and you have books with you . . . Now, Eliza, promise you will be very careful to-night. Lock your door and don't speak to a soul, and be ready in good time in the morning. I just hope there won't be a fire in the night. Couldn't you ask for a room on the ground floor?"

"Oh, there won't be a fire," said Eliza. "I only hope the train will be up to time, for it will take me every second to get to the Grosvenor, unpack, and be ready for Jimmie at 7.30."

"You won't have time to wire in that case, but you might wire to-morrow morning, and then I'll know you've got through the night—I think I'll ask that lady if she is going to London." Eliza, not caring much for the look of the lady in question, restrained her mother forcibly, but when she came back from a stroll with her father she found her deep in conversation with the only other occupant of the carriage.

"Here is my daughter," she began, and to Eliza, "This lady is going all the way to London, isn't that nice?" Her eyes urged her daughter to be forthcoming, but Eliza only said "Oh" in a distant manner, while her father's mouth twitched.

When the train began to move, Eliza could almost have leapt out and remained with her parents on the platform, they struck her all at once as somehow wistful and rather pathetic, and she leant out and waved till a curve hid them, then sank down in her corner feeling rather breathless.

She could hardly believe that it was she, Eliza, who was setting off alone in the London train, with the prospect before her of dining at the Ritz and spending a night alone in a London hotel. It was the very first time she had ever really been on her own—odd in this age of airy flights and careless partings—and she felt as unprotected as a lamb without its mother. She smiled inwardly as she thought what a large lamb it was, and what a small indomitable mother!

The lady in the opposite corner was regarding her, anxious, evidently, to burst into conversation. Probably, if she were given an opening, she would go on all day, for she had the slack mouth and the roving eye of the born talker, so Eliza pretended to study her picture-paper diligently, while all sorts of thoughts chased each other through her mind. Would the pale green satin look as well at the Ritz as it had looked in Blinkbonny? Mary Neish had given her a long chain of jade beads to wear with it. How good she had been. She wondered if she were thirty odd, and married, if she would be interested in helping young girls: she doubted it. The silver slippers would be lovely with the green. What

was that in *The Pilgrim's Progress* about religion going in silver slippers? She couldn't remember, but *The Pilgrim's Progress* recalled her father, and then it seemed as if a cloud went over the sun as came over her the thought of Phemie Brown and the wedding clothes th
at were not needed . . . She turned quickly to the thought of Jim. It would be wonderful to see his play. That thrill was to be kept till she was back in London after the Swiss trip. She didn't know what she would see to-night; it would be fun to see anything with Jim and Gerald Meade . . . Ewan Cameron had said when he was in Glasgow at Christmas that he hoped she would come to Oxford with Katie for a day. Would he remember to ask them, and would Aunt James let them go? Ewan was quite settled down at Oxford and seemed satisfied and happy. Funny old Ewan! She took up one of the books she had brought with her and opened it. It was *Flemington* by Violet Jacob. She never tired of this delicate silver-point of a tale. There was something rather delightful about reading it now as she whirled southwards through the English counties, for it seemed to her to hold all Scotland in its slender bulk.

The lady opposite yawned suddenly and said, "I wonder the man hasn't been round to give us tickets for lunch. I want the first lunch, for I had an awf'ly early start this morning—from Helensburgh, y' know."

"Really?" Eliza said in a discouraging tone, lifting her eyes for a second from her book.

But the lady was not to be daunted.

"Yes, we've a house there and go ourselves for the early months and let it for July and August. D'you know Helensburgh? It's awf'ly nice."

Eliza said that she did not know Helensburgh.

"No? Mebbe you don't belong to the West? You do? Reely? Well, of course, we're Glasgow too. Newlands. D'you know Newlands? It's awf'ly nice. Was that your mother seeing you off? She seemed anxious about you going so far alone. Is this your first visit to London?"

"Oh no," Eliza said coldly.

"Well, mothers are apt to be fussy. I've a daughter of my own. I still call her my wee girl, though she's sixteen and at a boarding-school. She's all we have, and so we miss her. My husband travels for his firm, so I'm a lot alone. I'm just taking a run up to London to see my sister. She's married to a gentleman in a Bank—Richards the name—and they live at Putney. D'you know Putney? It's awf'ly nice."

Eliza said that she did not know Putney, and tried again to go back to her book.

"Where are you going to live in London?" was the next question.

"Oh, I'm going to an hotel for to-night and going on to Switzerland to-morrow."

"Fancy! Switzerland. I've never been there, but I hear it's awfly nice. My husband isn't fond of foreign travel, so I haven't seen as much of the world as I'd like . . . I suppose your friends'll be meeting you. No? Oh, at the hotel? I see. Which hotel? The Grosvenor? I know the one you mean."

When luncheon-time came Eliza found herself seated next her travelling companion, who smeared an extravagant amount of mustard on her plate, remarking, "It's not the mustard we use but what we leave on our plates that makes Colman's fortune."

She went on talking through each course.

"I was wondering," she said, "if you happened to know the Johnstons who live next door to us—a house called Gairloch? No? Why I asked was you reminded me a wee bit of Isa Johnston at first, and I just wondered if you were mebbe related . . . Your father's a minister, isn't he? I seemed to know his face this morning at the Central. He's not Dr. Davidson of South Pollokshields?"

"My name is Laidlaw," Eliza said.

"Fancy!" The lady's mind was evidently working feverishly. Presently her face cleared and she said triumphantly, "Of course. I've an aunt a member of your father's church, a Mrs. McCormack—my mother's sister. She's a plain old body, as aunts often are, but she'd speak a day about your father—and your mother too. Well, really, isn't it a wee world? D'you know, I hardly ever enter a railway carriage but I meet somebody I've some connection with—it's wonderful!"

The good lady would have talked happily all afternoon had Eliza not so obviously become absorbed in a book. As it was, she fell into a sound slumber.

The train was not late, and Eliza leapt like a deer from the carriage the moment it stopped, and had a porter marching towards the luggage-van before the other passengers had gathered their belongings together, and in a very short time she was at the Grosvenor.

She looked vaguely round at the people standing and sitting about in the entrance-hall and wondered what she ought to do first. Find out the number of her room, she decided, so she approached the office and asked the glossy-haired young man who was leaning over a large book if a room had been booked for her.

"What name?" he asked, and Eliza blushed profoundly at her own stupidity.

"Laidlaw," she said meekly, and the young man ran his finger down a column and said, "257. Register here, please." Presently she found herself in a lift with a small page, and when she had been taken up two floors, then along a corridor, up a short stair, down another long corridor and round a corner, she wondered if she would not have been wise to follow the example of Hop o' my Thumb and scatter bits of paper in order that she might find her way back.

"There's one thing," she said to herself, "if anything should happen, like a fire or an earthquake, I'm cut off from all human aid. It's a good thing mother doesn't know."

It was a delightful room when she got to it, as fresh and airy as a room in a country house, with a reproduction of the picture she called "The Stuart Baby" on the pale cream wall to cheer her. A crisp chamber-maid brought her hot water and she began to dress. Everything that she meant to wear that evening had been laid on the top of her trunk, and it did not take long to get into cool, slim under-things. Her hair, being wavy, was easy to arrange.

She put everything ready for the night, and tidied the room, before she slipped into the green dress, and the gleaming beads and the silver slippers. She had managed wonderfully so far, and if only Jim was waiting for her downstairs she felt the worst would be over.

She stood quite five minutes before the long mirror admiring herself from every angle; then, locking her purse into the trunk and putting the key into the little bag she

carried, she looked round to see that all was as it should be, and set out for the entrance-hall. She lost herself several times, but finally found the main staircase, and as she stood for a moment to watch the people she espied her brother. He turned at that moment and saw her, and clutching her cloak she ran down to meet him. Her face was pink with pleasure, and she said shyly like a child, "*Jimmie.*"

"Hullo, 'Liza. You've managed well. Absolutely up to time. Leave your key at the office."

When they were in the taxi he looked her over and nodded approvingly, and she was satisfied.

Gerald Meade was waiting for them at the Ritz, urbane as ever, and after the first frenzied moment, when she was quite sure she did not know how to eat all the new and wonderful dishes, Eliza enjoyed her evening to the full.

After some thought Jim and Gerald Meade had decided on a thrilling drama. Eliza sat absolutely spellbound, to the delighted amusement of her companions.

"Anybody would pay you to go to a play with them," Gerald Meade told her, "you make it such good fun. But I'd like to bring you to a play like this in the holidays when the theatre is full of small boys, and you hear at the more thrilling moments rat-like squeaks of excitement coming from all round. Last Christmas, at *Treasure Island,* there was a little chap in front of me who got an ice in the interval and made it last so well that the curtain went up before it was half finished. I watched him, and he became so transfixed with excitement that he forgot all about it, and his thumb was stuck in a little pool of melted strawberry ice when the lights went up at the end."

Gerald chuckled at the recollection, then went on—

"I say, it's too bad that I'm not going to Switzerland with you. That blighter Jimmie says you don't want me."

"I didn't know there was any thought of your coming," said Eliza.

"But you'd sooner go alone? It doesn't matter, Lisa, what polite lies you try to tell, your honest eyes always give you away. But remember this, please, you're coming down to King John's Lodge. My mother and I are counting on it . . ."

After the play Gerald suggested going on somewhere for supper, but Eliza preferred to go straight back to the hotel. She wanted to fall asleep quickly and get the night over.

The two men took her back to the Grosvenor, and Jim went up with her in the lift and saw her safely into her room.

"You're sure you're all right? Not afraid of anything? I'll be here in good time to-morrow . . . Goodnight, old 'Liza."

As they left the hotel Gerald Meade said to his friend, "What was to hinder you staying the night here with your sister? I believe that poor child's scared stiff."

"Not she!" said Jim airily. "I've all my packing to do yet, and a hundred things to arrange. It'll take me all my time to get away to-morrow morning . . . Are you coming back with me?"

"No," said Gerald thoughtfully. "I'll go straight home."

The first thing Eliza did when the door closed behind her brother was to go down on her knees and look under the bed. Then she opened the wardrobe door and looked fearfully within: she even shook the curtains to make sure that no one lurked in their folds. All seemed safe, so she fastened her door, congratulating herself that she took her bath in the morning, so could not share the fate of the

spinster lady in Stacey Aumonier's story who, on her first trip abroad, mistook her own door on her way back from the bathroom and spent the night *under the bed on which a murderer lay dead!*

But that was not the sort of story she could afford to let her mind dwell on to-night. She turned on all the lights, and the dimpled face of the Stuart baby seemed to smile reassuringly. She pulled apart the curtains and opened the windows that a careful chamber-maid had closed against smuts. A roar of traffic came up from the streets; electric lights blazed forth the merit of the goods they advertised; far below she would see the buses and taxis like toys. Fascinated, she watched for a little, then leaving the blinds up, for the lights outside were company, she undressed quickly.

Seeing she was so far from home she thought she might say her prayers in bed for one night, though she had an uneasy feeling that it was not quite respectful.

Eliza still began her prayers with the words she had been taught as a child:

> "This night when I lie down to sleep
> I pray the Lord my soul to keep,"

but instead of the simple "Bless Father and Mother and the boys, and all dear friends, and make me a good girl, for Christ's sake," she had an elaborate list of petitions which she went over carefully every night. She would not have felt that the people she cared most for were safe had she forgotten any part of her prayers. To-night she had a special petition for Jim's safety getting back to the Temple,

and a rather hurried little plea, "Bless Gerald Meade." She asked, in a phrase of her father's, for "travelling mercies," and begged earnestly that every one should be "spared" until she got home.

The day had been long and exciting, and her thoughts flew from one thing to another. The woman in the train who had talked so much . . . Why had she snubbed her? The woman meant only to be friendly: her mother would have listened to her so kindly that she would have made of her a friend for life . . . It was a pity, Eliza reflected, to be intolerant. Then her thoughts wandered to Phemie Brown. No one could help her but God, and she asked, "Comfort her, and make it up to her and to Sam." Her last petition was, "May I get what I want—*if it be Thy will.*"

CHAPTER 25

"Now sits the wind fair, and we will aboard."
King Henry V.

ELIZA woke with a start at eight o'clock, and thinking herself in Blinkbonny, was surprised to find that the window had been changed round in the night.

She enjoyed going down to the dining-room and choosing her own breakfast, and felt very much a woman of the world, sitting there with her purse-bag and the key of her room lying on the table before her, watching the other breakfasters.

It was easy, she felt, to be dignified when on one's own; relatives were so apt to give one away.

When Jim arrived he found her waiting for him, very trim and neat in her fawn travelling things.

"You've survived the night!" was his greeting. "Meade was quite worried about you . . . It's a jolly morning, but there's a breeze. I wonder what the Channel's like . . . I've taken seats in the Pullman. As mother would say, it's no good swallowing a cow and choking on the tail, and I daresay you will be as well to have an early lunch on the train. I don't expect you'll want to eat on the boat."

It was certainly very luxurious to have an armchair and a table for oneself, and a pile of magazines to look at. In one of them they found some photographs of *The Catfish* which made Eliza squeal aloud and then look guiltily round to see if any one had noticed her momentary lapse.

Jim had much to tell, and his sister, listening, realized

that it was because he was so young that he was so careless and bold, rushing and scaling heights that would have daunted men older and wiser.

A woman sitting on the opposite side of the gangway attracted the girl's attention. She was reading, but was obviously more interested in the couple beside her than in her book; her glances kept straying to the young faces.

Eliza thought she had never seen any one quite so perfectly and so suitably dressed. She seemed to be about forty or forty-five—a very comfortable age, reflected Eliza, for you could still look nice and take an interest in clothes and you were safely past the dangerous shoals and quicksands of youth; her face was alert but contented; she moved with grace and certainty. She had taken off one glove and on the forefinger of the left hand there was a beautiful square emerald. When the waiter came to spread a white cloth for luncheon, Eliza didn't think she wanted any. The fish tasted so very fishy and the chops which followed appalled her by their size.

"They must be at least three inches thick," she pointed out to Jim. "I wonder what behemoth died to supply them." But Jim only laughed and said they were excellent.

It had been warm in London, but there was a cold wind blowing when they got to the boat, and Eliza looked rather wistfully at the women who made straight for the frowsty comfort of the Ladies' Saloon. Not for her such a haven of refuge. Jim ordered two chairs to be placed in a certain position, and they sat down, and in a short time they were under way.

Eliza tried to become immersed in her book, but, somehow, at the moment the printed page seemed to have

little meaning, so she watched the people instead.

A group of young Indians stood near, dressed in European clothes, but wearing turbans. They were athletic-looking men, all except one rather effeminate youth whose lady-like features were contradicted by a soft black beard which straggled round his chin. What was obviously a honeymoon couple had their chairs next Eliza. They were in a state of beatitude, and it seemed a liberty even to glance their way, but Eliza noted sympathetically out of the corner of her eye the tender way the young man tucked the rug round his bride's feet.

The boat went on its way, the sun shone merrily on the white-capped waves, and though at times there were some rather disconcerting rolls, every one said how delightfully brisk and bracing it was.

"How long does it take?" Eliza asked once.

About an hour and a quarter, she was told. She looked at her wrist-watch. Another forty-five minutes—could she hold out?

> "There was a young man of Ostend
> Who vowed he'd hold out to the end . . ."

The absurd limerick rang in her head. If only she hadn't tried to eat that chop! The very thought of the great thing lying in congealing gravy made her shudder . . .

She must think of other things: of cottage floors of red brick new washed; new crusty loaves; pats of fresh butter; brown teapots; cool apples; scrubbed wood—anything clean and fresh and stationary. Ouf! A really nasty roll. Her feet were getting cold and that was apt to make one

squeamish. She had no rug—and the thought of rugs made her glance at the couple by her side. The pretty little bride no longer looked adoration into eyes that spoke again. She leant back in a weary, satiated way as if, sick of love, she longed to be stayed with flagons.

Eliza turned to Jim. He was smoking, absorbed in a story. Obviously no sympathy was to be expected from that quarter. A lady was leaning against the rail wrapped in a long cape, and Eliza recognized her as the woman in the carriage with the perfect clothes and the square emerald. Imagine being able to stand up!

She looked again at her watch. Still half an hour! The thing must have stopped. No, it was ticking, but time itself seemed to be standing still.

The boat pitched on its way. A wave playfully threw spray all over the deck. Jim laughed and put on his coat. "It's a jolly day," he said.

"Jolly," said his sister with all the conviction she could muster. She wished Jim wouldn't smoke. She had never realized before how nauseous was the smell of Turkish cigarettes.

"We'll soon see France," he said in a little.

Eliza's eyes were tight shut, she felt better that way.

"We're nearly over," said Jim, "perhaps we'd better—I wonder where would be the best place to stand."

Stand! Eliza felt that if she so much as opened her eyes she was lost.

"I say, you aren't ill, are you?" The incredulous tone was extraordinarily exasperating, but she managed to give a faint smile of denial.

"Come on, then. You see they're all going over there."

Eliza waved away the hand held out to her.

"All right, but there's no hurry, is there? I'm just coming."

Cautiously she got on to her feet and glanced at her neighbour, the little bride. She, too, was being urged to rouse herself, and, wan and peevish, was trying to see her face in a small mirror. The sight evidently gave her no satisfaction, for she thrust the mirror back in her bag.

Eliza was on her feet. She moved cautiously towards Jim, and in doing so came within sight of the young Indian. His poor face under its gaudy turban was a ghastly green, and as he bent over a basin the fringe of soft black round his chin seemed the last touch of horror.

It was too much for Eliza: a wave of cold deadly faintness came over her, and she sank down on the first thing she saw, which happened to be a crocodile-leather dressing-case. She was sure this was the end, and it seemed immaterial whose private property she chose to die on.

Presently she heard some one say in a soft, soothing voice, "I wonder if a little brandy would do you good," and then her head was raised and smelling-salts held to her nose. She managed to look up. Jim was standing grinning nervously, while the "Emerald Lady" of the railway carriage supported the recumbent form of his sister.

CHAPTER 26

"If I were King of France,
That noble, fine land . . ."
NEIL MUNRO.

BUT the worst was over. Once in the Paris train, the landing and the Customs over, Eliza was again in perfect health and spirits.

As they sat in the dining-saloon partaking largely of tea, with hot toast and marmalade, cake and fruit, she said, with a sigh of pleasure, "It was almost worth while to feel so ill, it makes me enjoy this so terribly. Who said French tea was made of hayseed and lukewarm water? Never, not even at Corhope, have I had better tea."

Jim nodded agreement. "It was the War," he said. "The smallest village in the battle area will produce a good cup of tea now: the Tommies taught them."

"Look how funny the sugar is! Jimmie, did you thank the Emerald Lady for being so kind? I did feel a fool, but it was the sight of that Indian's face that finished me."

"You should have seen your own," Jim told her with brotherly candour.

"Was I awful? Anyway I'm thankful I wasn't actually ill. Faintness is more genteel, you must admit. But I was sorry to let you down."

When the Geneva express jerked itself out of the Gare de Lyons that night, Eliza tried to compose herself to sleep. But it was her first experience of a night journey and everything was new and exciting. Her thoughts leapt

forward to what she was journeying to. High mountains. She had always longed to see great heights, and had read and re-read every book on the Alps she could lay her hands on. She had Sir Martin Conway's book with her, and as soon as it was light she meant to read again certain chapters.

She was glad when Jim came for her at Annemasse to go out and get coffee. It was all such fun—the hurried meals at the buffet, watching the other passengers, passing through entirely new country. That was what made it perfect; it was a voyage of discovery for Jim as well as Eliza. Together they watched for the first glimpse of the snow peaks, and when—suddenly—behold—beyond—they swam into view, sharp against the sunset sky, clear as crystal, they experienced together the first glory of the mountains which never comes again. Chamonix, when they reached it, enchanted them, the little town at the foot of the tumbled, glittering field of snow, guarded by tall rock spires.

It was not yet the season for real climbing, but the moment they were settled into their rooms in the hotel Jim rushed out to interview guides and arrange for such expeditions as might be possible. Mont Blanc was out of the question so early in the season, but the Aiguilles were there to be conquered. Then followed days that were glorious to look back on, but nerve-racking to live through. It is idle to pretend that Eliza liked the thought of ascending these needle-peaks. When she stood beside her brother and heard him arrange with Michel and Peter to be ready at 2 a.m. the next morning she felt as if she were watching the signing of her own death warrant, yet, when she woke in

the grey dawn and realized that it was two o'clock and that no one had come to rouse them, she went herself to wake Jim.

The little museum of mountaineering relics had a horrid fascination for her.

"It's odd," she said in a depressed voice as they came away—"it's odd that their boots come off."

"If yours come off," Jim promised, stopping to light a cigarette, "I'll have them preserved; and I'll rechristen the Charmoz 'Eliza's Needle' in your honour."

Eliza refused to be amused, and went to bed to dream of broken ropes, and gruesome-looking bits of leather that had once been climbing boots.

But they did not risk their lives every day. They had glorious times glissading on the snow-slopes, asking for ptomaine poisoning by lunching at newly opened huts on tinned things that had been lying about since the year before, and coming back to their hotel to order not *thé complet* but what Jim called *thé très complet*, which meant not only rolls and butter, but honey and mixed biscuits as well.

They ferreted out of corners books that had been left behind by previous visitors. It was a case of digging for hidden treasure, and they found gold in the shape of a story published away back in the 'nineties, a delicate romance called *The Wood of the Brambles.* They became so enamoured of this work that they quoted it in and out of season. The pictures they saw in it! The little lonely boy skipping in the long corridor with his hands in his breeches pockets, the powder falling from his hair and sprinkling his scarlet coat. his sword clattering at his side: the Wood of

the Brambles at the Rising— *"Whisper, Dinny me son, come here a moment till the gintleman kills ye"* . . . Theophilus at the Rectory, philosophizing over his dinner-table—*"This table is old, and it has come from a room with dark panels and a slippery floor, and big windows that open on mossy steps into a garden in France. White women, with lace about their delicate hands, touched it serenely: it used to mirror their diamonds, and powdered masses of hair : they are dust now, those beautiful ladies . . ."* The characters lived to them and became their friends: Sir Dominick, who seemed fated to do the wrong thing; Kilclare; Sir Tony, who was cheerful until his wife Agatha died.

They were lying in a wood one afternoon looking through the tree-trunks at the great white dome of Mont Blanc, and talking about books.

"I wouldn't give a book like this," Eliza said, patting the green-bound *Wood of the Brambles*, "for a hundred of that," and she pointed distastefully at a newly published novel which Jim had been reading.

"You can't compare them," said Jim. "This is perfect in its own way. All this illness bit, 'Liza, it's brilliant. Not a word too much."

Eliza was making a little house of moss and cones and bits of stick, and she worked busily as she spoke.

"I know it's perfect," she said; "what I wonder is, was it worth doing? He doesn't get you any further: a death-bed with every detail brilliantly touched in, then—finish."

"Well, after all, what comes after isn't his job."

"I know," said Eliza, "that's why I say it's rather fiddling. What's the good of describing a death-bed if you've

nothing to give but cleverness? Before I left Glasgow—the day before, to be exact—I went to see a girl in the church—I don't believe you know her—a cheery little soul called Phemie Brown. I always liked her because she was cheery, and because, when I asked her one day if she were well, she said, Oh me! I get off awfu' safe.' She and her Sam had 'walked out' together for years and were to be married this summer; the house was taken and everything ready, when Sam, feeling seedy, went to a doctor to be vetted, and was told that he was dying. Wasn't that dreadful? . . . Father goes to see him a lot, and you can imagine how difficult it must be to find anything to say. Phemie told me he had read him something that Sam got comfort from. D'you know what it was?"

Jim threw a bit of moss at a forward bird and said, "Something out of *The Pilgrim's Progress?*"

Eliza shook her head. "You remember in *Rab and his Friends* where it talks of Ailie's eyes '*full of suffering, full also of the overcoming of it*'? That's what Sam holds on to. It must be splendidly worth while to write something that is so true and beautiful that it can't die so long as some one needs comfort."

"Quite so," said Jim, getting up to go, "but remember there are hundreds who can write brilliantly, but only at long intervals one who can write greatly."

Eliza said good-bye with great regret to Chamonix, to her bedroom, so bare and clean and polished, which looked out to the eternal snows, to the comfortable lounge full of brightly coloured cane chairs, to the friendly waiting-maids, to the meadows deep in flowers, to the pine-woods, and the frail blossoms on the edge of the melting snow; to

the guides Michel and Peter, and most of all to the mountains. Now that the climbing was over she remembered only the delight of it.

The brother and sister arrived in Paris with faces flaming from the snow and sun. Jim, unable to shed at once his mountaineering vigour, dragged Eliza, on a day of brilliant sun, at top speed from the Rue de Rivoli to the Bois de Boulogne.

After an exquisite luncheon, which she was much too hot and tired to enjoy, he asked her what else she wanted to do.

What Eliza really wanted to do was to stroll in a leisurely manner through some of the streets and look at the fascinating shops, drive to the Louvre and the Luxembourg, and later, partake of tea and cakes in one of the many inviting places, but the moment she mentioned shops Jim grew restive.

"Oh, *shops*," he said. "You'll get all the shops you want in London. I tell you what, we'll go to Napoleon's Tomb."

Eliza sighed and asked, "Is it far?"

"We'll get a taxi," said Jim, "and be there in no time."

But when they got there, Jim, after parleying with an official, came back and announced—

"They say the wretched thing's *fermé*. We've struck early-closing day or something . . . we may as well get back into the taxi and go to the Louvre."

Eliza would have been very happy among the treasures of France if she had been given time to take them in. The Venus of Milo, standing in her "valorous isolation" at the end of the long corridor, thrilled her, and she could have stood long, looking, but Jim, after walking once round, said,

"Well, that's that," and led her to the Winged Victory.

The Mona Lisa was a great disappointment to the girl. "I never really liked the reproductions," she confessed, "but I thought the original would be wonderful. D'you know who she reminds me of? Mrs. Stit. I almost expect her hand to go up to her mouth. She smirks."

Jim stood with his head back, studying the picture.

"Smirks? O Lord, no. She looks as if she knows some tremendous secret that will blow all her enemies out of the water. No wonder she smiles."

A party of tourists were standing before the picture. being lectured to by a guide.

"Did you hear, Jimmie?" Eliza said as they moved away. "He said she had lost a child shortly before, and while Leonardo da Vinci was painting her they had clowns or jesters making merry before her—I wonder if that is true?"

"Shouldn't think so."

"I don't know," Eliza said. "That smile may mean she is amused at the foolishness of men thinking that droll actions or words could take her mind off her sorrow."

"Well," said Jim, bored with the subject, "let's go to Smith's and get something to read. We'd better have tea there; the muffins are good."

Seated at tea, buried in a paper, Eliza raised her head and suddenly laughed.

Jim looked up from the *Times*, took a bite of muffin, and asked what amused her.

"It's so British and ridiculous to come to Paris and sit in an English tea-room and eat English muffins and read English papers! You're hopelessly insular, Jimmie."

"I am," Jim admitted. "The grimiest spot in the British

Isles means more to me than the whole Continent—Switzerland excepted."

"What shall we do to-morrow?" Eliza asked.

"Well, I was going to ask you—d'you think there should be a to-morrow? What about crossing to-night? I'll wire Aunt James . . ."

CHAPTER 27

"Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,
The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city square."
ROBERT BROWNING.

THE moment Eliza in her taxi entered the gate of The Cedars, the orderly atmosphere of the place seemed to envelop her. It was early, not yet breakfast-time, but she noticed that the front door was already washed and polished for the day, and when the elderly superior parlour-maid appeared she seemed to have shared in the same process. Surely never did a print dress rustle so crisply, or a cap sit more sedately! But everything and everybody in the house seemed to possess the same freshness. Katie in her white frock, Aunt James in her blue foulard, Uncle James in his shepherd-tartan trousers, were all redolent of good soap and decency. The breakfast-table was shining, the flowers seemed newly gathered, the fish and eggs were, like Caesar's wife, above suspicion.

The visitor, faded by a night journey, conscious of a shirt not in its first bloom, dull shoes, and stockings grimy about the ankles, felt that she, and she alone, shamed the brightness of the June morning.

"And what did you think of Paris, Eliza?" her uncle asked.

"I didn't see much of it, Uncle," Eliza said ruefully. "We only stayed one day, and Jimmie simply raced me round to see the only things he cared about. We didn't even have tea in a *pâtisserie* shop; we sat in Smith's and ate English

muffins, a thing we could have done any day of our lives; and then it was borne in on Jimmie that he couldn't stand it another day and off we came."

"Dear me," said Uncle James, "I never knew anything like the restlessness of the present age, they rush at things and swallow them without tasting." He buttered a bit of toast carefully and looked across at his wife. "You remember, my dear, our visit to Paris? In 1901, wasn't it?"

Aunt James nodded. "Our first visit was in 1901, in May. But we passed through Paris, you remember, on our marriage trip to Switzerland?"

"Oh, Aunt James, did you go to Switzerland?" Eliza cried.

"Indeed we did. It was my first trip abroad, for I had always been nervous of crossing the Channel. Your uncle and I stayed at Geneva, and went short excursions, and sailed on the lake. The two things that seem to have impressed themselves most on my memory are the blue of the lake and the excellence of the honey."

"You didn't go up among the mountains?"

"No, it wouldn't have been good for your uncle's heart, and indeed neither of us had any desire to get into close touch with them, though they looked very well from the hotel veranda. We brought home lots of carved bears, and cow-bells and things. It was a most enjoyable holiday."

"Considering it was your honeymoon, Aunt Phemie," Katie put in, "that almost goes without saying."

"As to that," said her aunt, "I doubt if many people really enjoy their honeymoon. They've a lot to learn about each other, and there are bound to be unpleasant surprises. Of course your uncle and I weren't young, and didn't expect much, and so we weren't disappointed and peevish." Mrs.

Pringle's large placid face suddenly crinkled into a smile, and she finished, "And Eliza's thinking that I'm an old woman who is talking of what I know nothing."

"In Paris," said James Pringle, "there are many interesting sights. I am disappointed, Eliza, that you didn't make better use of your opportunities. You remember the very pleasant day we spent at Versailles, my dear?"

"I remember the fountains," said his wife—"You saw the Louvre, Eliza? When I was a child we used to say a rhyme:

"Mrs. Brown's gone to France,
Nothing can improve her
Except to see the Tuilleries
And waddle through the Louvre."

Eliza laughed. " 'Waddle' sheds a light on Mrs. Brown."

"There's nothing so exhausting," said her aunt, "as looking at pictures ; my feet give out at once; but I did enjoy the big shop called The Louvre. I got some hand-towels there that are being used to this day—surprising, out of such a gimcrack place. I always promised myself that if we went back to Paris I'd get some more, but we're not likely to go now. Our travelling days are done, and we must just be thankful for a comfortable home and good servants."

"In 1901," said her husband, "we were not popular in France. I remember buying a paper with a picture of one Boer putting to flight about a hundred British. I pointed out to the woman who sold it that it was an outrage, and she agreed with a shrug. I said, 'He laughs longest who laughs last.' She replied, '*Ah, oui, M'sieu.*' A light people the French.—Well, Eliza, I am sure you will agree with me

that the more one sees of other countries the more one appreciates one's own. There's a stability about Britain—"

"You'd better get on with your breakfast," Aunt James said. "The rest of us are finished.—Katie, take Eliza to her room and see that she has everything. Perhaps she would like a bath."

"I would indeed," said Eliza, "a bath and some clean clothes, and then I'll feel more respect for myself."

"You certainly don't look your best," said Mrs. Pringle, that frank and fearless commentator. "Very *disjaskit.* A night journey makes the prettiest plain and makes the plain absolutely repugnant."

Katie and Eliza laughed together as they took their way upstairs. "Did you give Rowatt your keys?" Katie asked.

"I did not. I'd really so much rather unpack myself, and then I know where to get things when I want them. It doesn't matter, does it? Rowatt won't feel hurt or anything?"

"Not if you explain to her, but she's getting old you know, and she is just a little afraid of being considered so. You'll let me help you, won't you? I'll get your bath ready. I've laid in a stock of your favourite geranium-salts, soap, scent, powder, but don't let Uncle notice powder or you'll be sent to wash your face."

"My dear," said Eliza, " don't talk to me of powder. I hate the sight of it. When we started off for a day's climbing I covered my face with vaseline and coated it with powder until I looked like a pierrette, but all to no purpose, my face simply peeled. Look at it now. It's partly that that gives me the *disjaskit* air alluded to by Aunt."

Katie looked in her kind concerned way into her friend's

face, and, as usual, found something comforting to say. "Oh, but, Lisa, it's going to be lovely when it's all off."

"That's all right then. I'll look as if I'd been visiting a beauty specialist." Eliza knelt down to open a case. "My sponge-bag's here, I think. Root in there for my dressing-gown, Katie. Towels! Oh, thank you . . ."

An hour later, bathed, and dressed in a clean print frock, Eliza sighed with pleasure. "Now I feel a different creature! And you've put everything away so beautifully. You spoil every one, Katie—Aunt, Uncle, the stranger within your gates."

"It's so lovely to have you to spoil. I've been literally counting the hours. Eight whole months since I saw you. It's a comfort having Jimmie in London. He comes out now and then to Sunday luncheon, and sometimes he rings up and asks me to tea, and then I hear first-hand news of you all. It's so good of him to bother about me."

Eliza protested wrathfully. "Katie, don't be absurd. It is not decent to be so humble. It's an honour for Jimmie to entertain you; do take that attitude. Men need to be kept in their places—even Jimmie, bless him. Oh, Katie, isn't it fine that the play is a success? They say it may run for six months, and he's probably going to America this summer to see about it being produced there."

Katie looked suitably impressed, and asked when Eliza was to see it.

"Friday," said Eliza. "Friday, as ever was. You and I are to dine somewhere with Jimmie first. I think he is making a party; won't it be gorgeous?"

"Gorgeous!" Katie agreed. "Lisa, what does your mother say about the play? Is she proud?"

"Not proud—no; rather ashamed, really. She would rather it had not been written or produced, but seeing it has been she is glad—practical always!—that it is not a dead loss. She doesn't go to see her friends about it—you know her quaint trick of calling on her intimates when she has something to boast about?"

Katie laughed. "Isn't she a darling? . . . Now begin, please, and tell me about everything. Remember you have eight months' news to give me."

"Yes, I must have a thousand things to tell, but at the moment I can't remember anything."

"Begin at the nearest end," Katie advised, "and work back. Tell me first about your night in London. I wanted to suggest that I'd come in and sleep with you at the Grosvenor, but I was afraid you'd think me absurd. You dined at the Ritz? Tell me about that. What did you wear? You *have* got some nice clothes. I like that green."

"I wore that at the Ritz. I think I looked all right. It was great fun."

"Was Gerald Meade in good form?"

"He always is, don't you think? A most gay and equable person. I would have been very grateful for your company at the Grosvenor. I had never been alone in a hotel in my life. I thought of you safe in The Cedars, and felt very much on the high seas of life. And it was a 'crook' play we went to, and I dreamt of detectives under my bed.—Oh, and you would have laughed to see me in the boat, sinking, overcome, on the dressing-case of an unknown female! I must say Jimmy was *noble* . . . There's one thing, Katie, I've quite made up my mind about: I shall never go abroad for my honeymoon; it would be too humiliating."

Kate laughed and flung wide her arms. "How lovely to hear of any one expecting a honeymoon! No one in The Cedars is looking forward to anything but their latter end.—Oh, I forgot, there are letters for you, Lisa. Here they are!"

Eliza glanced through the little pile and opened one. "From Mother," she said. "I haven't heard for days."

Presently she laid down the letter and looked out at the sunny garden. High trees enclosed it and only the roar of traffic through the summer heat reminded her that she was in London. Odd to be in London and find oneself by some words on a bit of paper transported back to Glasgow. Her mother's letter might have been the magic carpet, so quickly did it carry her to the familiar atmosphere of Blinkbonny.

"I am glad," Mrs. Laidlaw wrote, "that you are having such a fine holiday, but it has been a miserable ten days for me, sitting waiting for telegrams! How thankful we should be that you have both been preserved. I cannot think it right for people to risk their lives for no purpose, but your father, being a climber, doesn't agree with me. In his children's sermon on Sabbath he told them of the rope with the red thread through it and spoke of you and Jimmie climbing. The people were so interested—the personal touch is such a help—but Rob and Geordie were covered with shame.

"I lunched at the Wests' yesterday. Ten people there; I didn't know them. Meta's friends. Everything was beautifully done, beginning with iced grapefruit. Mrs. West told me afterwards that they gave the party because they have a very expensive temporary cook and thought they

might as well make use of her.

The pastry was really delicious; I came home quite humbled, for you may say pastry's my only talent.

"Mrs. Hartree came to tea on Monday, just home from France. She had been to see Jimmie's play in London! She told me the place was full and the audience enthusiastic. I said I hoped they would learn no harm. I didn't continue the subject, for I saw amusement in her eyes.

"Mary has heard from Skye that her sister has got measles, and is much perturbed. She says she knew something would happen, as she dreamed she met a white cow that spoke to her in Gaelic!

"I have sad news for you about Mrs. Service. I've noticed her curiously feeble for some time—I don't think she ever got over that attack of influenza she had last March—and quite suddenly on Thursday she collapsed. The doctor says there is nothing organically wrong, but she is so weak. She is being well cared for by a niece who was trained as a nurse, and hasn't a complaint; just likes to talk about her mother and far-back days. The gentle soul—how we shall miss her on Fridays at Blinkbonny! . . ."

"Are they all well?" Katie's voice recalled Eliza to her surroundings.

"Yes, all well. Read it, do. Poor Mrs. Service is ill. D'you remember the nice old body who always spent Friday with us and said 'Ayhe'? There's a small note enclosed from Father, but he merely tells me what flowers are out in the garden!"

CHAPTER 28

"That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture."

ROBERT BROWNING.

ELIZA found The Cedars in summer a very pleasant habitation. She liked to come down in the morning and eat her breakfast with the glass doors open to the garden, and Uncle James wandering out and in, reporting how many degrees of heat the thermometer in the veranda had registered. And there was no lack of things to do. The two girls went to the Temple Flower Show, the various picture shows, shopped, and saw a few matinees. What Eliza liked best was to start off early and go to Hampton Court and spend long hours by the river, or in the river towns exploring old shops. They generally brought home some small tale of adventure to relate at the dinner-table.

Eliza sometimes found her uncle trying when he boasted of the beauties of England.

"Yes," he would say, "the stately homes of England are well worth seeing. You have nothing like Hampton Court in Scotland."

"We've got Holyrood," Eliza reminded him. "It's old enough and beautiful enough surely."

"Oh, not bad, not bad, but look at the numbers of beautiful, well-preserved places we have in England. Why, in every village you will find a church centuries old, and a manor-house and . . ."

Eliza grew pink in her effort to speak with sweet reasonableness and not excite her uncle to the detriment of his health.

"Yes, but England was always rich and Scotland poor. Why, we just lived in hovels, when even the poor people in England had timbered cottages." She went on, her indignation rising, "No wonder we've little to show in the way of ancient churches and documents. If we did manage to possess any they were destroyed in Border raids. It is dreadful to read how poor Scotland was, how bare and struggling. They laugh at us and say we get all the best places; but it's about time we got something; we've fought hard for it."

Her uncle veered round in the opposite direction.

"But it was the poverty and hard living that made the Scots what they are. When they worked in the fields all day, and walked eight miles at night to learn Latin, they realized the value of education, but now"—he shook his head pensively and helped himself to port—"now they are spoon-fed and soft. All this free education is utter nonsense. Teach a boy reading, writing, and arithmetic, and apprentice him to a trade when he is fourteen. If he has a desire for more education he will get it somehow. They talk about progress. I've lived eighty-four years and I see nothing of it. Give me the old ways and the old men who led the nation. When I think of . . ."

"And where had you tea?" Aunt James asked very loudly and firmly, and Eliza gladly seized the chance to talk of real cream and home-made walnut cake and other uncontroversial matters.

Jim came to dine one night and gave them particulars

about their evening at *The Catfish.*

"Dinner at a quarter-past seven at the Savoy," he told them. "That shouldn't hurry us. I've asked Mrs. Bob Wedderburn, and she's bringing a girl who's staying with her just now—Miss Graham."

"Not," said Eliza, "not one of the Miss Grahams you knew at Oxford?"

"Yes," said Jim, flushing a little. "This is Grizel, the younger one—and I thought it would amuse you to meet Hilary Bolton. You know his books?"

"I don't like them," Eliza said.

"You won't like him either," Jim prophesied, "but he's really not a bad sort. He's been very decent to me, and he's easily the best playwright we've got. I'm going to take you and Katie to see his *Honest Men* next week."

Eliza looked forward with almost painful intensity to the evening. When it arrived she and Katie began to dress immediately after tea and were ready only just in time to start for the Savoy.

They came back about eleven-thirty, slipping in very quietly so as not to disturb the decorous household.

Eliza stood at the dressing-table looking at her reflection in the glass. Katie watched her anxiously.

Presently Eliza said, "Well, that's over," and began to slide her arms out of her green gown. "What d'you think of Miss Graham?"

Katie considered. "I don't know if she's exactly pretty, but she is beautifully finished. Did you notice her hands, and her feet, and her lovely slim arms?"

"Yes." Eliza nodded. "She's as slim as a wand. I liked her little sleek head. She has an attractive way of speaking, too

. . . She made me feel like a—like a grandfather clock—you know, big and slow and heavy."

"Nonsense," said Katie. "Tell me, did you enjoy *The Catfish?*"

Eliza turned a tragic face to her friend. "How *could* I, with all those people sitting about? They spoiled everything. That dreadful Hilary Bolton talking in the most condescending way of Jimmie's 'little effort.' I hate that man, wearing jewels, and scent, and not looking half-washed."

"But I thought you seemed to be getting on well with him at dinner."

"I honestly tried to, though I saw that he was feeling it a most fearful nuisance to talk to a 'provincial' like me, but he talked such tosh, sneered at 'middle-class puritans' and said Art must be free and unfettered—ass! I gave up trying to be pleasant then, and said in an irritating, prim voice that nobody should write anything that could not be read aloud! Then he got rude and said he supposed I only read Rosa Nouchette Carey. I said, yes, I liked Rosa, and cold baths, and Wright's coal-tar soap . . ."

Katie laughed. "Everything that he didn't, in fact? But didn't you like Mrs. Wedderburn?"

"Oh, delightful! She has got a face like a kind, good child, and is so alive and interested. She told me she had seen *The Catfish* four times already and liked it better every time. Katie, we'll go some afternoon quietly by ourselves to the pit and really enjoy it, shall we? . . . Oh, here is a letter that came as we were going out. It's from Ewan, I think. Yes, he wants us to go to Oxford next Thursday."

Katie gave a little quick sigh.

Eliza glanced round at her. "Would you care to go? He says there's going to be a performance of *Twelfth Night* in the gardens of some college. It would be rather jolly, don't you think?"

"Are you sure he asks me?"

"Of course. See—there's the note?"

Katie took it almost reverently, read it and laid it down again.

"You'd like to go, Katie? " Eliza asked.

"Like? I'd adore it. I've never seen Oxford."

Eliza yawned. "It would be nice if Jimmie could come with us . . . I'm dropping with sleep. Oh, I hope next Thursday will be fine."

It was fine. A still grey morning gave promise of a hot day, and the three left Paddington in high spirits. Ewan was meeting them, looking remarkably spruce in a light grey suit. His hair had evidently been cut for the occasion, and his tie and socks and handkerchief all matched. Eliza noted these details with a sort of amused affection.

After greeting his guests he looked round him in a bemused way, saying, "Now I wonder . . . what would you like to do first?"

"Let's have a walk round," Jim suggested. "It's Katie's first visit and there's a lot to see."

"That's what I'm thinking about," said Ewan. "I want Miss Katie never to forget her first sight of Oxford, so I planned—" he stopped and looked dreamily at a porter loading luggage on a taxi.

"What did you plan?" Eliza asked. "Don't fall into a reverie among the traffic."

They spent a delightful morning under Ewan's guidance,

and at one o'clock he led them to his own house.

"Ewan!" Eliza shouted, "you never told me you'd got a house in the Turl. Deceitful fellow!"

"It was the merest lucky chance," Ewan explained. "It belongs to my College, and when it fell vacant they let me have it on a long lease. They've been very decent too about doing it up for me. The old chap before me had lived in it for forty years without letting a paper-hanger near the place, so it was a bit fusty. I wanted advice badly, but I wanted still more to surprise you." He opened the door. "You must tell me what you think."

The entrance-hall was quite small and would have been rather dark had it not opened by a glass door, which now stood wide open, into a sunny garden. It was delightful to stand in the cool dim hall and look out to the flowers and the green lawn.

"The dining-room," Ewan said, as he opened a door on the right—if that is not too important a name for such a small room."

"You've made the most of it anyway," Eliza assured him, looking round with keen interest. "Why, Ewan, I didn't think you knew or cared anything about old furniture. You never seemed to take any interest when we talked and planned, Katie and I, about furnishing."

"Perhaps, though, I subconsciously benefited," Ewan said meekly.

"Look, Katie, just look at the delicious old dresser and the gate-table and this—"

"That," said Ewan, "is what is called a 'bread and cheese cupboard'."

"And very nice too!" said Jim.

"Now, what else?" cried Eliza, all impatience.

"My own room is opposite; like this, it is small, with a dull view, but that doesn't matter for eating or working."

He led them across the hall. "This is the living-room. I think when it's finished it will be a pleasant room." Ewan opened a door and, expectantly, they entered.

It had evidently been built on as an addition to the little old house, and was much larger than the other rooms, with a wide window to the ground. It was panelled in white, and contained nothing but three Hepplewhite chairs.

"By Jove, a jolly place!" Jim said, while Eliza cried, "Oh, Ewan, do be careful what you put in here; it's a treasure of a room."

"I don't want it dressed up," said Ewan. "What do you advise, Miss Katie?"

"Oh, I'm not much good, but . . . don't you think, with white walls and so much window, you will want a lot of colour to keep it from looking chilly on grey days? Warm curtains to draw on winter nights, two armchairs—you know the kind with 'lugs'?—one on each side of a log fire, a bookcase here . . ."

"And," said Eliza, "Ewan sitting looking like an illustration by Hugh Thomson. Ewan, I do wish you had lived in those days; the trousers were so attractive."

She turned away to look out at the garden, and Ewan looked at Katie, repeating the words, "Warm curtains to draw on winter nights, a log fire, and—what else? Oh yes, two armchairs."

When they viewed the one guest-chamber, Eliza wanted to know if any one had occupied it.

"I had my father and mother here," Ewan told her. "They

left last week. It seems it has always been the dream of my father's life to see Oxford, but he never spoke of it. They were very happy."

"Oh, Ewan!" said Eliza, "how glad you must be that you made them come!"

"Yes. Come away now or Mrs. Hemming's lunch will be spoiled."

"Your Mrs. Hemming is no mean cook," Jim told his host as they finished the meal.

"How did you find such a treasure?" Eliza asked.

"I didn't find her exactly; she adopted me, and I live under a sort of benevolent autocracy. Mrs. Hemming is a pessimist of the deepest dye. She always expects the worst to happen. If a friend falls ill, she confidently expects a fatal issue; if a train is late, there is no explanation but a smash. She is a good person for me to live with, for I am goaded into taking the bright view . . . I think we'll come back here for tea. I daresay it's more comfortable than a tea-shop."

They set off for the play, Jim holding Eliza's arm, talking eagerly, and laughing, while Katie followed more soberly with Ewan. The promise of the grey morning had been fulfilled; it was a perfect June day. Shadows lay black on the white streets, over high grey walls great green chestnuts spread their branches, and through doorways and arches came glimpses of emerald turf.

Katie and her companion spoke little. Katie was too busy realizing her own happiness to talk. "If I never get anything else," she was telling herself, "I've had this. I'm walking with Ewan in the place he loves best. I've seen his house, and can picture him now going out to his work and coming back of an evening to the drawn curtains and the log fire"

Katie did not really care much for Shakespeare, but she buried the heresy deep, and assumed an intelligent alertness when Eliza clutched her hand during her favourite passages.

Back in the little dining-room, with tea laid on the gate-table, and a blue bowl of cherries making a splash of colour, Eliza sank into a chair, sighing, "Oh, hasn't it been gorgeous? Thank you, Ewan, a thousand times for asking us. You've given us a perfect day . . . And oh, that divine play! How I love the Clown. Did you ever know anything so beautiful as *O Mistress Mine* sung sleepily—Oooh!"

"What a sigh!" said Ewan. "Pour out the tea, somebody."

"You do it, Katie." Eliza turned to Ewan. "I do love to see Katie pour out tea. I always feel she should call it 'tay,' and wear a fichu and mittens. She has such a particular, prim little way of filling each cup, and there's such an anxiety in her tone when she asks if you take cream. Just watch!"

"Lisa, you are absurd!" poor Katie protested, as Ewan placed a chair for her before the tea-tray.

"Yes, she is," Jim said. "Pay no attention to her, Katie. I'll stand beside you and give you moral courage, and we'll pour all the cream into 'Liza's cup—she hates it."

But Katie, with meticulous care, made Eliza's tea as she knew she liked it, and looked up at Ewan, mutely asking to be told his tastes.

"Naked tea," he told her, "neither sugar nor cream."

"And I," said Jim, "take cream if it is cream; if it's blue milk I'd rather be without it."

As they left to go to the station the two girls stopped and looked back at the little house, and, as usual, Eliza spoke

first.

"Such a lamb of a house, Ewan, and in the very place I would like best to live in."

Katie glanced at Ewan to see if he seemed cheered by this remark, but he only smiled his rather patient smile.

In the train, going home, Jim had much to say of his friend. "Old Ewan is one of the very best. Bar gold. He's not the sort of person you come to the end of. I've known him for years and I keep on finding new and delightful things about him."

Eliza swung the window strap. "He's a dear, dreamy old thing. Quite happy, I think, with his little house and his books and his Mrs. Hemming. Wasn't it like him to bring his people up when Oxford is gayest? Can't you imagine Mr. and Mrs. Cameron among all the bright crowds?"

"Ewan would see nothing wrong with them, you may be sure of that," Jim said.

Katie said nothing. A deep depression had settled on her spirits and the conversation exasperated her. An impatience with her companions filled her. What right had they to be so condescending, so sure of themselves? Ewan might be dreamy if he liked; she preferred it to hard alertness . . .

CHAPTER 29

"A queer old place! You'd surely say
Some tea-board garden-maker
Had planned it in Dutch William's day
To please some florist Quaker."

AUSTIN DOBSON.

BREAKFAST was rather late at The Cedars, and letters by the first post were brought up with the morning tea.

The day after the Oxford visit Eliza got two letters. The one she opened first was from Geordie, and was short and to the point.

"DEAR ELIJAH," it ran,

"Rob is to get the fencing medal, and father is going to give him a coloured book about birds. If there had been a third prize in English I would have got it. Hope you like London. How is Katie?

"Your aff. brother,

"GEORDIE."

The other she studied before opening.

"I don't know the writing," she told Katie, who always came in to drink tea in her friend's bed. "It's probably some one leaving me a fortune . . . Cheriton—that's Gerald Meade's house. This must be from his mother."

She read:

"DEAR MISS LAIDLAW,

"Gerald tells me you are in London just now, and I am writing to ask if you could spare time to come to us for a few days? I have heard so much from my son of you and your family that I long to meet you. Perhaps you will let me know if you can fit in a visit to us, and if so, what day we may expect you.

"Yours sincerely,

"SOPHIA MEADE."

Eliza handed the letter to Katie and, propped against the pillows, drank her tea thoughtfully.

"It's quite a nice letter," said Katie. "Will you go?"

"I don't know. 'Sophia Meade.' What sort of person does that name conjure up to you?"

Katie, arrested in the act of getting up, knelt on the bed and considered.

"A self-respecting person," she said. "Not silly or gushing; sincere. Gerald told me his father was killed in South Africa when he was a baby, so his mother must always have had a lot on her shoulders."

"They're great friends, Gerald and his mother," Eliza said. "Sophia is not a name of this age, is it? I wonder . . ."

"You'd better get up," said Katie, "and not be late for prayers. It upsets Uncle for the day."

"Oh, I won't be late; I can take my bath and dress and do my hair in twenty minutes. I'm quite a lightning artist."

"I don't see," said Katie, "how you can be really clean. I'm afraid your bath is what Aunt calls 'a lick and a promise'."

"Not in the least, my dear. It's simply that after long

years of dressing fast I'm an expert. Your leisured life has been a snare to you; that's why you soak yourself half an hour every night in a hot bath—most unhealthy."

Eliza jumped out of bed, threw on her dressing-gown, gathered up her sponge and towels, and made a face at Katie.

"Now I leap lightly in, and in ten minutes I'll be with you again."

In spite of her light words Eliza was much exercised in her mind over the invitation. To begin with, the thought of staying in a strange house with an unknown hostess filled her with horror. And then, she did not disguise from herself that this was not an ordinary invitation. Though she had hardly admitted it to herself, and certainly never hinted it to Katie, she had known for long in her heart that Gerald cared for her. And—yes—she cared for Gerald. She had liked him from the first when he had come to Corhope the untidy, happy, kindly boy, and now she could not well imagine life without him. He was ordinary, not very clever, quite an unromantic figure, but she told herself she liked him like that. And he could give her what she had always wanted. It was rather hateful to think of that, she supposed, but it did matter. It would be lovely to have great possessions—to have everything beautiful, to go through life in silver slippers. And Gerald was young, very little older than herself, and they would have such fun together. Oh, it was going to be glorious, only she shirked the preliminaries. To meet Gerald's mother would be an ordeal.

Jim, when he heard of the invitation, said, of course she must go; she would enjoy it immensely.

Aunt James said, "Certainly, it's a delightful chance."

Katie was divided in her feelings. She liked and admired Gerald, and privately thought him admirably suited to Lisa. He would give her her proper setting; with him she would walk in silk attire. Like the "baron's heir" in the old song he "would with jewels deck her hair." But she feared Ewan was going to be hurt, and to keep Ewan happy, she confessed with shame to herself, she was prepared to sacrifice both Lisa and Gerald.

However, when the decision was made and the invitation accepted, she threw herself with her usual enthusiasm into helping Eliza to get ready.

The two girls spent hours together reviewing all Eliza's clothes—making two new tennis frocks and furbishing things up generally. Katie lent a pretty wrap. "For going out to the garden after dinner," she explained, and added, "And take this geranium silk coat to wear over your white things, and we'll try to get a little hat to match—they look cheerful on a grey day. Do take my new brushes. You will want things very nice with strange servants poking among them. I'll pack for you—yes, please let me, I love to do it. What about your bath-clothes? Are they everything they should be?"

"I wish," said Eliza, much touched by all this thoughtfulness, "I do wish you were coming too. What fun we would have had discussing everything!"

"Yes, but you must save up everything to tell me. I wonder if there will be other guests?"

Eliza looked gloomily at her friend. "I don't know which would be worse," she said, "to find a large party of unknown and terribly well-dressed people, or to be alone with Mrs. Meade. Both seem about equally ghastly. And

Gerald isn't to be there for the first three days. I do think it's wretched of him. Probably Mrs. Meade simply hates the thought of a strange girl descending on her, and I don't blame her."

"If I were you," Katie said, "I would let Mrs. Meade see that you are shy. Don't try to seem calm and hard and casual; it's horribly unlovable. Constantly I hear middle-aged women complain of young girls being so cock-sure. Modern parents don't suppress their children, and the result in many cases is disastrous. I simply hate to hear children contradict their parents, or remarking, 'Oh, *humour* Mother,' as I heard a brat say the other day; but then, of course, Aunt brought me up 'suppressed,' so I'm hardly a judge of modern manners."

Eliza laughed. "You're a stern little critic anyway," she said.

At that very moment Sophia Meade, in her own sitting-room at King John's Lodge, was saying to her friend Grace Chichester, "How comfortable and happy you and I are together, Grace. It does seem a pity that your visit should be spoiled by this girl coming."

"But why should it be spoiled? I'm interested in seeing Gerald's friend."

Sophia Meade put in a few stitches in the bit of embroidery she was working at before she said—

"You can afford to be interested in a detached way. I can't. Gerald is all I have. He wants to marry this girl; if she doesn't like me I lose everything."

"But of course she'll like you. All the girls round here adore you."

"All the girls! There are only three now that Betty

Marlowe's married, and they are country girls, simple. The ordinary girl I can't cope with. If she's decently civil to me I'm quite grateful."

Grace laughed. "Oh, I know, some of them are pretty bad. It's a pity that they should have ugly manners, for they do look such ducks with their cropped heads and straight legs and little unimportant frocks. And some of them are charming. Who is this girl, did you say?"

"Her name is Lisa Laidlaw."

"A pretty name."

"Quite. You must have heard Gerald speak of the Laidlaws. The father is a clergyman in Glasgow. The brother was at Balliol with Gerald; he writes rather well and has a play running just now—J. R. Laidlaw."

"What! J. R. Laidlaw who wrote *The Catfish*? I saw it, a most amusing thing. But, Sophia, my dear, this is interesting. The girl is Scotch, then?"

"Oh, very. I mean to say she has lived in Glasgow all her life. Gerald seems to adore the whole family. I like the sound of all of them, except the girl."

Grace Chichester looked affectionately at her friend and asked, "Who was it said that a mother began to be jealous of her son's wife when the son was in the cradle?"

"Oh, it's not that. I *want* Gerald to marry, only . . . "

"Only you don't believe there's a girl in the world good enough for him."

"I'm not so foolish, Grace," Mrs. Meade began, then she stopped and, against her will, laughed, "But, yes, I fear I am just as foolish as that. Lamentable, isn't it? And to every one else Gerald seems the most ordinary of mortals!"

"Does Gerald seem sure of his bride?"

"By no means. Perhaps that is why I'm inclined to dislike her. She evidently shows no eagerness. I don't think he has asked her—rather fears to, I gather—and I have the idea that she is coming down here in a business-like way to see if the proposition is good enough, don't you know? Grace, I'm a perfect beast. I've absolutely nothing against the girl. It's my moral nature that has become warped at the prospect of a daughter-in-law."

"Oh, my dear, don't apologize to me. I'm all with you against the intrusive female. When does she come?"

"To-morrow." Mrs. Meade sighed inhospitably. "To make up for any lack of warmth in my feelings, I've given her the nicest room in the house, the walnut-room looking over the rose-garden, and the room next it for a sitting-room. I've made them both as pretty as I could. And I've asked people to tennis and to dinner, and arranged picnics and—"

"Then you will never see her alone," said Grace.

"Does that matter?"

"Well, we'll see. Poor little Sophie! But you know, my dear, you may be really sorry when the girl goes."

Her friend smiled unbelievingly.

When Eliza, with a sinking heart, got out of the train at Cheriton she found herself greeted by a slim young-looking woman, who, it surprisingly appeared, was Gerald's mother.

"Do you hate being met?" she asked. "Lots of people do, but I always feel it a little lonely to arrive at a strange station . . . The car is out here. Yes, thank you, Mason." To the porter, "We can quite well take it with us."

They had a six-mile drive through charming country,

clean and sparkling after two days' rain, and conversatio was easy, for Eliza was interested and Mrs. Meade liked pointing out the beauties of her home.

They came to a village with thatched houses and small bright gardens, and a grey church standing on a green knoll surrounded by modest headstones. A few yards farther on they turned into an avenue of fine beech trees, at the end of which stood the house.

"Thirteenth century," Mrs. Meath, told her guest. "They say King John came here after Runnymede, which would account for the name, King John's Lodge . . . Are you a gardener, Miss Laidlaw?"

Eliza turned truthful blue eyes on her hostess and said—

"Not worth calling one. This is beautiful."

"Ah, but wait till you see the garden. If you aren't tired will you come straight out now? I think we'll find Miss Chichester there."

She led the way through a black-and-white hall to a glass door which opened on a flagged path bordered with flowers, then down some stone steps to a garden enclosed, a little decorous Dutch garden, where Grace Chichester, wearing a black-and-white muslin dress, sat in a chair among rose-coloured cushions.

"This is our guest, Grace." Sophia Meade turned to the girl, "I may call you Lisa?—Grace Chichester."

Miss Chichester stood up, trailing her rose-coloured parasol on the grass.

"How d'you do, Miss Laidlaw? I'm so glad your first glimpse of this place is in June and in sunshine." She stopped and stared. "Forgive me, but your face seems familiar. We must have met somewhere."

Eliza laughed rather shamefacedly. "Perhaps I shouldn't recall it to you. Crossing the Channel I took the liberty of suddenly subsiding on your dressing-bag—do you remember?"

"Of course I do. I travelled down with you and your brother. I'm afraid I listened to your conversation."

"We called you the Emerald Lady," Eliza said, "because of your ring. If you listened to us, I looked at you. I thought I had never seen any one so perfectly dressed—I mean, in exactly the most suitable things."

Mrs. Meade laughed. "That's Grace's forte, always to know, always to have, exactly the right thing to wear. How clever of you to notice!"

"How clever of her to tell me," said Miss Chichester. "I'm afraid, Miss Laidlaw, you're as bad as our hostess. She, too, has the gift which makes the saying of sweet and flattering things appear the merest simplicity."

Sophie Meade smiled at Eliza. "We're in the same condemnation, it seems! Take this chair, that one cockles. You must want tea badly. Journeys make one so thirsty . . . I think these are cucumber sandwiches."

Miss Chichester was studying the tea-table. "Hurrah, it's a party—iced cakes and strawberries and cream always constitute a party. It's because of you, Miss Lisa. When we are alone, being middle-aged and dull, bread-and-butter and sponge-cake is the fare provided. Of course it's quite wrong; youth doesn't need sprightly things half as much as middle-age. But that's life—Tell me, did you enjoy your holiday in Switzerland? "

Eliza opened wide eyes as she asked, "How did you know it was Switzerland?"

"Oh, my dear Watson, the labels! Besides, I heard you talking. You were more interesting than any book—two such fresh young folk. I thought at first you were a honeymoon couple, you were so absorbed in each other, and it gave me quite a pleasant thrill to find you were brother and sister."

That evening when the servants had left the room, the three women sat on at the round table drawn into the window, enjoying the mingled scents of a garden in June when night is falling, scent of warm earth, of new-cut grass, of honeysuckle drenched in dew.

It was quite light in the window, and the lit candles which winked at the glasses, "thin as bubbles, opal bright," were not necessary, but the room behind was darkening. Eliza looked round at the portraits growing shadowy in their frames, the gleam of silver on old wood, the long stretch of polished floor, and she sighed. "It's almost too beautiful," she said.

The two older women smiled at her, and "What is too beautiful?" asked Grace Chichester.

"Everything—this room, the candle-light and the twilight, the gardens outside. You see—I'm not very much accustomed to beauty. At home . . ."

Eliza stopped suddenly and smiled, or, rather, she gave a schoolboyish grin. Had they known it, she was very like her brother Geordie at the moment.

"I wish you saw our dining-room," she said. "It's got furniture covered in moquette (because that wears best when there are boys), and on the mantelpiece there are two bronze horses complete with riders; the pictures are big steel engravings, and enlarged photographs of things like

Deacons' Trips. Not much beauty there!"

Mrs. Meade looked at the girl with suddenly interested eyes.

"There may not be beauty," she said, "but there may be something else, something no money can buy or skilled workmen make."

Eliza nodded. "I'm only just realizing that now," said she. It had surprised her a good deal to find herself describing to her new friends the Blinkbonny dining-room, but later in the evening she surprised herself still more.

They had been talking of names, and Grace Chichester had said, "What a pretty name yours is, and quite uncommon—Lisa."

And Eliza had replied, "But my real name is Eliza."

When Grace Chichester kissed her friend good-night she said—

"My dear, I consider you a lucky woman. I like this Eliza. To talk in flowers, she is a larkspur—she might so easily have been a Dorothy Perkins."

CHAPTER 30

"I have never been in love, and I don't know. You say it makes sunsets last for all of life?"—*Balisand.*

MEANTIME, in The Cedars, Katie was trying to follow in thought her friend's experiences.

One warm afternoon, when her aunt and uncle were resting, she sat in the garden writing to Eliza, when she saw Rowatt advancing towards her across the sunny lawn.

"A visitor!" thought Katie. "Bother!"

"A gentleman to see you, miss," Rowatt said severely.

Katie laid her writing-case on the grass and got up. Who had Rowatt got hold of now? Any male passed muster with her as gentleman if he had a civil manner. Probably this gentleman wanted to sell her a sewing-machine or something equally exciting.

"Where is he, Rowatt? In the hall?"

"Oh no, miss." The tone was shocked. "In the drawing-room."

Katie smiled to herself as she went upstairs to the shaded drawing-room. She would probably have to walk the gentleman down again in a very few minutes.

A tall figure was standing in the middle of the room, and when she saw who it was she gave a gasp.

"Why, Ew—Mr. Cameron! How nice to see you. Are you staying in London?"

"No. I came up to-day."

"Oh—isn't it bad luck? Lisa isn't here." Katie's tone was tragic. "She has gone on a visit"—she paused—"to Gerald

Meade's mother."

She looked apprehensively up at Ewan, dreading to see disappointment cloud his face, but he remained, like Pet Marjorie's turkey, "more than usual calm."

"Lisa will enjoy that," he said. "I know it's a charming old place. Is Meade there too?"

"Yes, oh yes—I mean, no, not yet. I think he goes to-morrow."

"Then I expect they won't keep us waiting much longer."

Katie stared at Ewan, amazed.

"Surely," he went on, "it's been perfectly obvious for a long time that those two would marry."

"And—and don't you care?"

"I? Why should I? They won't ask my permission. You mean, you thought I wanted to be in Meade's place?"

Katie nodded, and suddenly feeling her legs rather weak, she sat down on the sofa. Ewan followed her there, and for a minute the two sat dumb. Then Ewan said—

"We've got to get this right—I'm tremendously fond of all the Laidlaws, their friendship has made a great difference in my life. I'm as proud of Jim's success and Lisa's beauty as if I were the brother I used to pretend I really was, but I don't think I ever wanted to be more than a brother. Lisa would have laughed at me . . . It would need some one kinder than Lisa to put up with me. Katie, I dared to come here to-day because I know you to be kind and pitiful. I've very little to offer you, you saw it all that day you were at Oxford, but I want to tell you that I began to care for you the first time I saw you at Corhope. Do you remember? It was a very wet day and I had made a mistake about the trains, and had walked from the junction, and

arrived a bedraggled object. Lisa and Jim laughed at me, and said, justly, that it was like me to make such a mistake; but you looked sorry. I know it's very unlikely that you will ever care for me, but there may come a time when you will be glad to remember that somebody worshipped you–"

To Katie it seemed as if the whole world had suddenly broken into song. She felt deafened but uplifted. Could it be true? Ewan worshipped her: he was sitting there beside her, saying it now.

Her reply to his plea was like herself. "Ewan," she said, "how *glad* you've made me."

Eliza lay in bed in the room that was a joy to her. As she sipped her tea her glance fell on a book laid out on the writing-table, a slender volume bound in calf and stamped with a gold wreath in the centre, in which some long-dead girl had written in a fine pointed hand recipes for Christmas possets and pot-pourri. What a treasure! And the petticoated dressing-table and the bow-fronted chest of drawers; and the bed with its slender pillars and little canopy of chintz; and the nosegay which Mrs. Meade put fresh every day on the table beside the bed. Eliza sighed as she looked round, sighed half with pleasure and half with—what? Was it boredom? Surely not, and yet it had come to her with a sort of chill the night before, as they sat in the Dutch garden after dinner, while roses bloomed round them and a nightingale sang, that there was something lacking. Her soul had cried out with nostalgia for other things—the study at Blinkbonny, shabby and kind and familiar; Rob and Geordie sprawling on the floor; Jim and she arm-in-arm on the sofa; her mother darning in

her low chair; her father reading Scott to refresh himself before an evening's visiting in high tenements, or playing a tune on his whistle.

Grace Chichester had come into her room at bedtime and talked for a little.

"You use a candle," Grace had said. "Don't you like electric light?"

"Oh yes, but a candle seems the only proper thing for this room. I am convinced Lady Barbara Meade carried that very candlestick when she came upstairs to bed in her tapping high-heeled shoes."

Then Grace had said suddenly, "Lisa, do you like life at King John's Lodge?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I wondered. To-night I was watching you and you looked—homesick."

"A few hundred years ago," Eliza said, "you would have been burned as a witch . . . As a matter of fact I was thinking that, unspeakably lovely as it was, it was rather dull after Glasgow."

Grace Chichester had raised her eyebrows in a surprised smile.

"Yes," Eliza answered the smile, "and that is funnier even than you think. In Glasgow I was always whining about life being ugly and cramped and narrow, lacking all grace. I thought myself too good for my neighbours—oh, and I'll think it again, I daresay, once I'm back, but just now it seems to me the Glasgow accent would sound like music. I'm tired of the clipping English tongue—oh, forgive me, I'm being frightfully rude, but you know you did ask. When I came here I seemed to have reached the place of

my dreams; I loved the beauty and the dignity of the house, the old servants, the space, the peace. I was as impressed as Mr. Salteena under somewhat similar circumstances—"

Grace had laughed and remarked that she regarded Mr. Salteena as one of the most profoundly tragic figures in literature.

"Well!" said Eliza, "I loved it all. I do love it all, but somehow, to-night in the moonlight, with the nightingale singing, when it was all so exquisite that there seemed nothing left to do but cry because of the beauty, I suddenly got the loneliest feeling. I wanted Glasgow and all Glasgow means to me—"

Eliza was thinking of that talk in the candle-light as she nibbled a bit of bread-and-butter. There were two letters for her on the tea tray, from Katie and Jim. She opened Jim's first.

It was longer than usual—generally he only wrote a hurried scrawl—and Eliza's face was intent as she read. Jim was going to America, leaving almost immediately. *The Catfish* was to be produced there in the autumn and it was necessary that he should be on the spot.

That was great news, but more was to follow—

"I've got something to tell you, old 'Liza," Jim wrote, "something that I'm telling to no one else at present. Grizel Graham has promised to marry me. When I come back from America I'll tell Mother, but don't say anything just now—she'd only worry. I wanted you to know at once. We've been such good friends, you and I, and will be to the end."

Eliza laid down the letter and stared before her. She was conscious of nothing but a great sense of loss. Jim was hers, had been hers from the beginning of things—and a long time ago the world began!

This girl was snatching him away from her.

The tears forced themselves into her eyes, but she rubbed them away impatiently with the back of her hand and took up Katie's letter. What a faithful correspondent she was!

What a kind and comforting friend! she could not imagine Katie snatching. She opened the letter, to read Katie's description of the most wonderful day in her life, finishing with, "I can't believe it, Lisa. That Ewan should be mine seems incredible. Of course I know you never cared for him, but I had firmly fixed in my mind that he cared hopelessly for you and when he said he worshipped me—worshipped, Lisa!—I thought I was dreaming and wanted never to wake again. And Aunt and Uncle are so good about it. Actually they seemed *pleased.* Ewan stayed to dinner and Uncle said he seemed an intelligent young man! Oh, Lisa, the little house at Oxford! I can't write coherently. If only you were here! And yet, I don't think I want to talk about it . . ."

Ewan and Katie! Eliza was profoundly astonished. She felt she ought to be glad, but was she? She owned to herself she was not. On the contrary, she was both hurt and indignant. Ewan was her friend; Katie hardly knew him. She was fond of Ewan in rather a condescending way, had taken his devotion for granted—and all the time it had been Katie!

She was disgusted at the hot angry feeling that filled her. She had Gerald, and she wanted Jim and Ewan as well.

How selfish, how grasping! Some words came back to her that she had heard her father preach from: *"Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"*

It was a chastened Eliza that greeted Gerald that evening, a softened Eliza, shaken somewhat in her belief in herself, doubting almost if she were worthy of this young man.

The nightingale sang again that night, a hesitating, unbelievably sweet song, when the two stood together in the garden, and Gerald very briefly and most in-eloquently told his love. And as Eliza looked at his face, very white in the moonlight and earnest, there was no thought of worldly gain in her heart, no thought of herself, nothing but a flooding tenderness for this honest, ordinary fellow, and a great gratitude for his young adoration.

"If only this could last," she said wistfully, as they lingered, loath to go back to the house with its lights and talk.

"There are other things as good," said Gerald in his comfortable way. "Summer is all right, of course, though I don't much care for nightingales that people make such a fuss about, but give me autumn and winter. To come in from a day in the stubble, to a bath and a big fire, and you in a rose-coloured frock, with your shining hair, pouring out tea . . . That's always the picture I have in my mind. Let's be married in September—"

CHAPTER 31

"Here's a few flowers . . .
These flowers are like the pleasures of the world."
CYMBELINE.

MRS. LAIDLAW adored getting letters, and generally ran herself to take them from the postman when she saw him come in at the gate as they sat at breakfast, but this morning Geordie was before her.

He came back to the dining-room and solemnly presented his father with a circular.

"Is that all?" cried his mother. "I was sure there would be a lot of letters to-day."

"He has more," said Rob. "Don't be an ass, Geordie. Bring them out."

Rob, feeling the weight of his fifteen years, was beginning to be impatient with his brother's light-hearted pranks.

Geordie, grinning, produced the rest of the post.

"Four for you, Mother," he said—"Elijah and Jimmie and Katie and another. Two to Father."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Laidlaw, full of anticipation, "where are my specs? Has no one seen them?"

"I saw them lying on the coal-scuttle in the study last night," said her husband. "Have you had them since?"

"You should tie them on to you, Mother," Rob suggested as he left the table.

"Here they are," Geordie announced, "in a fruit-dish, pretending to be a banana."

"Oh, thank you, Geordie. They make life a burden, these specs . . . Good-morning, darlings. You haven't many mornings now till the holidays."

"Five," said Geordie. The prospect so filled him with joy that he aimed a playful kick at his brother, who was bending down to pick up a book. Rob's new dignity was not proof against this insult and the two reeled from the house locked in a bear-like embrace.

Mrs. Laidlaw put on her spectacles to read her letters, while her husband continued his breakfast.

"Walter, what do you think? Jim's going to America."

"I wonder why," said Walter Laidlaw, spearing a ball of butter.

"Business about his play, he says. Oh dear, that will be a great anxiety. America's such a dangerous place: floods and earthquakes, not to speak of the voyage. He expects to be away six weeks or two months, and says, anyway, he will be at Corhope with us in September."

Mr. Laidlaw ate his last bit of toast meditatively and remarked that it would be an interesting trip. Presently he asked, "Did you say there was a letter from 'Liza?"

His wife, engrossed in what she was reading, merely nodded, but in a minute she gave a startled exclamation.

"Why, Walter, the child's engaged. Yes—to Gerald Meade."

They looked at one another across the breakfast-table. Mrs. Laidlaw was the first to speak.

"Walter, you look quite—aghast. After all, it's good news. Gerald is a dear fellow . . . we should be thankful that Eliza is to be so well provided for; we could leave her little."

"I never thought of her as anything but a child."

"Why, Walter, she is twenty, and she's got all the sense she is ever likely to have . . ." Mrs. Laidlaw turned again to the letter. "I must say she takes it very calmly. A long letter all about what she has been doing, and the people and places she has seen, and then—just a sentence at the end: *'Gerald wants me to marry him, and I think I shall.'* Isn't that *like* Eliza?"

" 'Liza was never given to gushing."

"I don't want her to gush, but surely to her mother she might have been a little more forthcoming."

Mrs. Laidlaw was opening her third letter . . . "This is from Katie. I wonder if she knows—"

A minute later she lifted her head and said in a solemnized voice, "Walter, another shock! Katie is going to marry Ewan Cameron."

"Dear me," Mr. Laidlaw said, with the *Glasgow Herald* suspended in his hand.

"Yes, she can hardly write for happiness. Dear Katie! How lucky Ewan has been, for she has lots of money and she will make such a good gentle wife."

"But I thought—" Mr. Laidlaw began; but his wife went on, "I can't help wishing Eliza had written me a letter like this—so *innerly*; but the two girls are quite different. Perhaps Eliza's feelings are deeper—I don't know . . . I must say I never thought Ewan had the sense to propose to Katie. I used to be a little afraid that Eliza and he . . . Walter, would you rather Eliza had been going to marry Ewan?"

"Oh, I don't say that. I like Gerald, but—"

"And it's something that Eliza will be the mistress of

such a beautiful place. Poor child, she's had a great struggle keeping us up to the mark. I hope she will be more contented now. I'm glad that she seems to get on well with Gerald's mother. I do hope that she will try to be a daughter to her, a real daughter, for it must be very hard for Mrs. Meade to give up her only son. I've a good mind to write to her—Oh, I was forgetting my other letter; it may be from her. Yes—"

"I had some letters," said Walter Laidlaw, looking vaguely under his plate. "Ah yes, this is from Gerald Meade."

"What does he say?" his wife asked without lifting her eyes from the letter she was reading.

"A straightforward, manly letter. He's a good fellow, I think."

"Read that," said his wife, getting up and handing him the letter she had been reading. "I knew Gerald's mother was a nice woman . . . I think, Walter, we have great reason for thankfulness."

All that morning Mrs. Laidlaw trotted about the house doing her many duties in a dream. Her mind was full of pictures, and in each she was an interesting and important figure.

Immediately the early dinner was over she dressed herself carefully and set out to pay a round of calls. To-day she felt she really had something to call about. People could not but be impressed by Eliza's engagement, even though she (Mrs. Laidlaw) touched but lightly on the age and beauty of King John's Lodge, on the man-servants and maid-servants, the horses and motor-cars. Boasting she abhorred, but one might surely be permitted to mention a

place that had been in the same family—the family which was now to receive Eliza—for hundreds of years. Yes, she would go to the Wests, and probably to Mrs. Stit and one or two others, but first she must see her friend Mrs. Service, who was so far from well.

Out came the bag that was supposed to know its own way about, and was filled with fresh eggs and one of Mrs. Laidlaw's own sponge-cakes; a pot of rhubarb jam—Mrs. Service, she remembered, had a weakness for that preserve; and on the top a bunch of lilies from the garden.

It was a beautiful summer day, and when she left the cloistered quiet of Pollok Road with its villas and its gardens for the bustle of the streets, she gave a little gasp of pleasure at the brightness of it all—the shops with their awnings up, the fragrance and colour of the florists', the gay display in the bakers' windows, the drapers' full of pretty light garments. Throngs of young mothers wheeled perambulators towards the Park, and as Mrs. Laidlaw smiled at the chuckling fat babies she could not help thinking that really the world was a very pleasant place, warm and human, where nice things happened.

Mrs. Service lived in a little flat up two stairs. The niece who was nursing her opened the door to Mrs. Laidlaw and talked to her in the dingy little hall before taking her in to see the patient.

"She's not making anything of it," she said, shaking her head. "Just every day you would think she lost grip a wee thing more. She seems to have gone down all of a sudden, for a couple of months ago, even, she was real brisk and helpful and interested in everything . . . Her mind wanders a good deal. Ay, you will see a difference since you were

here last. No, the doctor says there's nothing to be done."

The venetian blind was down in the bedroom, but the sun came through in long shafts. It was a tidy, clean room, too small for the heavy mahogany furniture, which shone with the careful polishing of generations of good housewives. Mrs. Laidlaw recognized the 'bedspread' as being a treasured possession crocheted fifty years ago by Mrs. Service's sister Jeanie.

She bent over her old friend. "My dear," she said, "am I disturbing you?"

Mrs. Service opened her eyes, and smiled with something of the old welcome. "I'm real glad to see you. How's the minister?"

"He sent you these lilies from the garden. He will be in himself to see you to-morrow."

"Ayhe. He never forgets me . . . The sun's shining: it'll be bonny in Blinkbonny garden to-day."

"I wish you were there. But by-and-by, when you're stronger, we'll get you out in an open carriage. That is what you like, I know. Do you remember how you used to drive with me when I was ill? You are a better patient than I was."

Mrs. Laidlaw sat by the bedside for a little, not talking much, sometimes stroking the hand that lay on the counterpane and thinking how busily it had sewed and worked for her and for many others.

Suddenly Mrs. Service said, in a surprisingly clear, confident voice, "I'll be going home to-morrow night. I'll get a lift on the carrier's cart, and Jeanie'll meet me with the pony at Hamildean-foot."

Mrs. Laidlaw caught her breath, then, "Isn't this home?"

she said softly.

The sick woman looked round the room.

"That's my chest of drawers," she said, "but I never saw that wardrobe before." She looked straight at her friend. "You see, I can't have a home. I've no mother."

Hot tears rushed suddenly to Mrs. Laidlaw's eyes. "Oh, my dear," she said, "you will soon have your mother."

"Ayhe. I'm wearied for her and Jeanie."

"And Robert," said Mrs. Laidlaw. "He will be waiting for you."

"Robert?" She shook her head. "I dinna know him."

Out in the street again Mrs. Laidlaw stood for a minute, uncertain. The sun seemed to be shining as brightly as before, but she felt chilled and saddened and oddly desolate. She no longer felt any desire to go and pay calls; she wanted to go home, she wanted to be with Walter.

She found him in the garden. He was sitting on the garden seat with a book in his hand; one of the little green volumes from Sir Walter's shelf she guessed it to be. Was it her fancy or did his shoulders droop despondently?

He turned as his wife hurried across the lawn to him and rose to meet her.

"Why, Ailie, I thought you had gone out for the whole afternoon?"

"So I had." She was panting a little and glad to sit down on the garden seat. "But I've come back . . ."

"That's nice," Walter Laidlaw said, with his serene smile; "now we shall all have tea together."

Mrs. Laidlaw laid down her parasol and began to take off her gloves. They were new, and it was a pity to waste them,

even if clean gloves did seem very trivial to her at the moment.

"Walter," she said, "I've been to see Mrs. Service. I think she is dying, the dear soul. She has gone back to her childhood, to her mother and Jeanie, and oh, Walter, *she has forgotten Robert!* It gave me a shock. Robert, whom she adored and talked of incessantly . . . Isn't it sad and terrible?"

"Very sad."

Mrs. Laidlaw pulled out the fingers of her gloves carefully as she said, "It frightened me to see her so far away, she who was so practical and matter-of-fact . . . Is it possible I could ever forget you, Walter? . . . I was just thinking coming along the road what trivial creatures we are with our small boastings and braggings, and how unsatisfactory even a family is. Here is Eliza leaving us and going into a life so entirely different that she is bound to change and forget."

She stopped, suddenly struck by the look on her husband's face.

"Oh, Walter, it will be *dismal* without Eliza! You will have nobody to talk books with—I'm no use for that." She sighed and went on, "And Jimmie is full of his own concerns, which are not our concerns. He will marry too, very likely, a girl we have nothing in common with, and he will drift away and forget; and Rob and Geordie will grow up and go away. Walter"—there was a note of panic in her voice—"is that all life is—a forgetting?"

Walter Laidlaw watched two white butterflies coquetting with a clump of lilies.

"A forgetting?" he said. "A sleep? What does it matter,

Ailie? We know that when we wake we shall be satisfied."

Mrs. Laidlaw gave a sob. "I sometimes think that the one we lost is the one we shall keep. Tom never seems far away from me, somehow, but the others, out in the world, make me feel so left behind."

Walter Laidlaw laid his hand on his wife's shoulder. Presently he said, "I wonder if you would like to leave the town, Ailie? I'm beginning to feel that my work here is done, and if this talked-of union takes place between St. Luke's and Martyrs' they will want a younger man as minister. The church at Elliot is vacant, and I heard to-day that they want me there. It's our own countryside, only fifteen miles from Corhope. In a way it would be going home."

"Leave Glasgow?" Mrs. Laidlaw gazed at her husband. "I would be sorry to do that, and yet—life would be peaceful in the country, and a country town has always seemed to me the ideal place to live . . . It's been pretty hard work in Martyrs' all these years, perhaps we've earned an easier time—you have, certainly. Could we manage to live, do you think, on a country minister's salary, with the little we have of our own? I think we could: I'm sure we could."

She sat ruminating. It would be very sad to leave Martyrs' and all the loyal people; just when her class was so successful too, and the people in such good heart. But, she reflected, the wife of the new minister would probably do far better than ever she had done . . . It would be sad, too, to leave Blinkbonny, where Tom and Rob and Geordie had been born, and where Tom had died—oh, little Tom, little Tom—but not so sad as once it would have been. For Mrs. Learmond was no longer there to smile on them with her

adventurous blue eyes; Mrs. Service, gentle soul, would never cross the threshold again to sit and sew and chat and murmur "Ayhe"; Eliza would soon be gone—

As these thoughts came to her Mrs. Laidlaw drooped, a small pathetic figure on the garden seat but presently her eyes brightened, her head went up—she was seeing pictures, seeing the manse at Elliot a centre of life to the whole neighbourhood, Walter a power for good in the little town, children and grandchildren bringing honour to the name of Laidlaw . . .

Presently she turned quite briskly to her husband.

"It's a good manse at Elliot, Walter. It was enlarged for a rich minister, and we have lots of furniture, not like a young man beginning, with everything to buy. You remember we once went to tea and you fell in love with the garden with the burn running through it, and I fell in love with the cupboards! . . . But there's a lot to think about before we settle anything . . . Rob and Geordie. Their education would be a difficulty; but wouldn't they adore having their home in the country? And Jimmy would like it, and Eliza and Gerald—how queer that sounds, Eliza and Gerald! . . . I've just been thinking, Walter, how goodness and mercy have followed us. We've had our losses and disappointments; the children aren't perhaps what we hoped they would be when we sat and talked about their future by the nursery fire when they were babies; they are doing well in a way, but it's not our way. Perhaps it's from me they get their worldly ambition—I always had a sneaking respect for worldly success, and that's what you never had. You are the least vulgar person I ever met. Oh, Walter, I hope you'll be left to me, for I'd be a poor

creature without you. You never change, you never fail me, you are my rock in a weary land."

It was an old complaint of Mrs. Laidlaw that her husband did not listen to one half of what she said. It was certainly provoking to have him turn now, and merely remark in reply to her genuine outburst of feeling—

"The red hawthorn is over for another season!"

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